



10

The Great Cleric

White-Collar

Survival in Another World

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime





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Chapter 11: Sordid Schemes and Secular Sages

01 — An Unexpected Homecoming

Light engulfed us as the magic circle in Neldahl activated, followed by an odd sense of weightlessness. But when the gravity came back on and our vision cleared, we were met with an unexpected sight.

“It’s...the big training field?”

I’d thought we were supposed to end up back in the pope’s room, where we’d first been teleported from. And yet, despite the soft darkness of dusk, I instantly recognized where we were as the Church of Saint Shurule’s joint training field. The fact that we were home, at least, was some measure of comfort, but it seemed my assumption that circles were directly linked to one another was mistaken.

First things first—I had to let Her Holiness know that we’d made it back. But just as that thought crossed my mind, the sound of armor plates scraping together alerted me to a group of knights approaching with lit torches.

“Sheesh, guys, I wasn’t gone for *that* long. A whole platoon of knights is sort of overkill.”

I quickly let my guard down and waited for them to make it across the field. It soon became clear that something wasn’t right, though. The knights were armed, and they wore stern expressions. Some even shot nasty glares our way. The rumors about me having lost my holy magic due to divine retribution had certainly spread, and the Church was rife with zealots who would surely regard that kind of transgression with the same vitriol as a serious crime. Though not all, a few such individuals appeared to be among the armed welcoming party.

“What’s our move, sir?” Nadia asked, noticing the strange atmosphere.

“We’re ready for anything,” Lydia said.

I wasn’t quite ready to go throwing punches yet. “Play it cool for now. We’re

all on the same team, after all.”

The sisters nodded and waited cautiously behind me. As the knights neared us, they parted. A group of women in armor proceeded through the crowd.

“Good evening, Lumina. Ladies,” I greeted them. “I thought you were deployed.”

“We were, for a time,” Lumina replied. “Until a more pressing mission necessitated our immediate return.”

I was happy to see her, but she seemed intent on sticking to her role as representative of the Knights of Shurule. The other Valkyries looked taken aback by my relaxed demeanor, as if the rumors had managed to shake even their trust in me. Their gazes weren’t scornful, though. It felt more like concern, and I was grateful for that, at least.

At any rate, it was looking like I’d have to clear my name and turn this inquisition into an *actual* welcome party if I wanted to make it out of this peacefully. It was time to show off some holy magic. I didn’t like Lumina troubling herself with doubt for me.

“Sounds like you guys have it rough. But here you are coming all this way to meet me. Did Her Holiness ask you to do this?”

“No. Perhaps you haven’t heard, seeing as you’ve been away, but people have been...saying things about you. Many things.”

“Things, huh? You mean like how I broke a taboo, had my healer job revoked, and lost my holy magic? Don’t tell me you’re all here to arrest me.”

I widened my eyes in exaggerated shock as some of the soldiers placed their hands on their sword hilts. Perhaps the believers of the rumors were limited to those who didn’t know me personally or those with an axe to grind. You can’t please everyone, but it still didn’t feel very good.

It was kind of funny that the rumors were actually true—I *did* commit a taboo and lose both my healer job and magic. So it was a good thing I had managed to become a sage.

“I’m sorry things have come to this,” Lumina said. “I want to trust you, but it’s

beyond my control. I must ask you to prove your innocence.”

“So the important mission was apprehending me, I take it.”

“That is what I’m led to believe.”

My status as a dragonslayer must have scared them enough to send for the Valkyries directly.

“Well, assuming there *was* a Church healer who’d done something bad enough to have his class and magic revoked, I imagine it would certainly reflect poorly on Shurule. I’ll grant you that.”

The knights suddenly glanced around at each other, confused by my empathetic response. Those who appeared to get even angrier, however, didn’t escape my notice. It was possible that they’d played a hand in this trouble. Or maybe they just plain didn’t like that I’d come back. Either way, I had to be on my guard.

Lumina’s pained expression made my chest tight. “Precisely.” She closed her eyes. “I’m under orders to arrest you on charges of defamation of the Healer’s Guild and the Church of Saint Shurule should the rumors prove true.”

The deliberately emotionless tone she gave her voice ironically spoke to her true feelings. She clearly thought this was unfair, and the fact that she hadn’t tied me in ropes yet was likely the most courtesy she was capable of showing me. That was more than I could have said for some of the countries back on Earth.

“I see. You know, the pope knows the entire situation. You could have just asked her.”

“We aren’t here on Her Holiness’s orders. It comes directly from the Executive Division.”

“Executive Division? We have one of those?” I asked.

“It is the organization that supervises the vast majority of Shurulian healers and knights. All except for Her Holiness’s direct subordinates answer to them. Including us, you understand.”

“So they’re independent and totally untouchable by the pope. Excluding the

fact that her subordinates have indemnity, I suppose. Where were these people when corrupt healers were running rampant?”

Lumina blinked at me, then smiled. This was an entire segment of government that, apparently, could just go and arrest an S-rank healer completely unbeknownst to the pope. I had a feeling I’d probably find a few worms if I ever turned over that stone. Maybe the existence of the Executive Division was the reason Her Holiness had wanted a sage at her side a century ago.

This was all speculation, of course, but these guys were kind of getting in the way of my chances at a peaceful life. I’d have to convince the pope to toss these executive whatevers by the wayside one of these days.

“I see how it is,” I said. “The moment people start bad-mouthing me, they turn their backs on me, huh? And while I’m away in Neldahl too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Lumina. It’s on these executives for believing the malicious gossip. What they’ve done is set a precedent that S-ranks can just be detained for whatever false accusation people decide to throw at them.”

A few knights reacted to that. I didn’t know their names, but I made sure to remember their faces.

Lumina looked eager. “If the rumors really are false, then surely you can prove it?”

I had been standing there chatting with Lumina for a while. The knights probably didn’t like that.

“Oh, of course. I don’t think anyone here’s hurt, though.”

If Brod, Lionel, or any of the others had already been captured, I was ready to throw the Knights of Shurule under the bus. Thankfully, though, the Valkyries’ presence likely meant they were fine. As if any of them would let themselves get arrested in the first place.

Lumina’s expression suddenly became impossible to read. “I’m going to trust you, Luciel.”

“I could never lie to you. You know I’m a terrible actor.”

She smiled, resolute. And then, just as my instincts screamed out at me, there was a flash of steel. Blood flew.

“Okay, *ow!*”

“L-Luciel?!”

I reacted just in time. Lumina had tried to cut her own arm straight off. But the moment I had seen the glint of her sword, I’d activated Physical Enhancement. Moving faster than I ever had in my entire life, I had reached out to grab the blade. And now my left hand was nothing but a bloody, stumpy palm.

“*Extra Heal.*”

Before addressing a perplexed Lumina, I first dealt with the excruciating pain. Fragments of light formed where my fingers used to be, flowing into the open wounds, until they became new fingers.

Her rash actions had come out of trust for me. Lumina had believed I still had my holy magic, and no one would have been able to question the reattachment of a completely severed limb. Granted, it ended up just being my fingers, but I took it a step further than reattachment and straight up made new ones. Lumina was utterly stunned—by my rushing to stop her *and* by my display of holy magic. The knights were similarly speechless, though I couldn’t tell if that was because I really did have my powers or because they were basically legendary now.

Frankly, I couldn’t have cared less. I was more concerned about Lumina trying to cut off her friggin’ arm.

“Lumina, I’m flattered you have that much confidence in me, but I’m less flattered by your willingness to dismember yourself.”

“I-I’m sorry, but...are you okay?”

“Just fine.” I clenched my hand repeatedly.

“Oh, thank goodness.”

“Thank nothing. I’m not ready to give up how close you came to hurting

yourself,” I stated.

Lumina flinched before grinning shyly. “I’m sorry. It was all I could think to do to clear your name. I never doubted you, but this level of skill... I could never have dreamed of such healing abilities.”

I could understand somewhat. Still, this was going too far.

“Thank you for worrying about me, and for wanting to help,” I said, loudly enough for the other knights to hear, “but don’t even think about doing it at the cost of your own safety. I’ve got nothing to prove to people who suspect their own ally because of some baseless gossip anyway. You believed me from the start, so I care far more about you than them.”

“I, um... Yes,” she stammered. “I understand.”



Lumina looked down. I leaned in so that no one else could hear, and whispered, “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Luciel...”

All right, anyway. Since I was a sage now, I could use that as an excuse for being able to cast Extra Heal. Only thing left was to deal with the others.

“I hope the captain’s actions are enough to assuage any concerns that I can’t use holy magic anymore,” I said to the soldiers. “Now, I know you have your orders, but is there still any need to detain me?”

The regiment captains at once took a knee and bowed to me, their underlings soon following suit. A few remained standing. Ignoring them, I spotted Catherine next to the training ground’s entrance.

“Long time no see,” I said.

“It certainly has been a long time.”

Even she was decked out in full armor, to my surprise. She was privy to my situation, so I’d expected her to be on my side.

“Surely you heard the truth from Her Holiness, right? About why I traveled to Neldahl?”

“All I heard was that you were away to study and improve yourself,” Catherine answered.

She knew I wasn’t a healer anymore, but apparently she wasn’t aware that I’d become a sage. There must have been a reason for her silence on the matter.

“Then why are you following the Executive Division’s orders?”

“Because I’m Captain of the Knights, Luciel. I answer to them, not to Her Holiness, as fortune would have it. I’m just glad the rumors turned out to be unfounded.”

She was still a retainer to the pope, though, so her being captain shouldn’t have interfered with that authority. I had to wonder why she was prioritizing the executives.

“Anyway, I’d like to inform the pope of my return,” I said. “Will you join me?”

“Unfortunately, *you* will have to accompany *me* to see the executives. I have my orders.”

Okay, now this was getting weird. Why would Catherine, of all people, insist on not letting me—a direct subordinate of the pope—report to my superior? If this were literally anyone else, it wouldn’t have been so strange.

“I assume you’ve seen all the proof you need. You’re saying this business is more important than Her Holiness?”

Catherine sighed wearily. “True, your holy magic is beyond questioning at this point. They probably want to probe you about the specifics.”

I didn’t sense any malice from her. Good thing too. I didn’t want to make an enemy of someone so many people—including me—trusted.

“You mean to say that the Executive Division effectively has more authority than the pope?” I asked. “More than an S-rank healer?”

“No organization is so simple that titles and rank are enough to summarize the power structure. Technicalities and red tape can force you below your station. That goes for S-ranks just as well as captains.”

In other words, she was subject to one such restriction. Maybe I could do something to placate the executives for the time being—something like revealing I had become a sage. That would serve to explain why I’d gone to Neldahl under the guise of taking a vacation. Before that, though, I had to figure out what the executives were planning for me.

“Not that I plan on complying, but what exactly does the Executive Division want to ask me?” I asked.

“Everything, I imagine. They’ll be investigating you thoroughly, including the rumors.”

Based on her expression, I wouldn’t be in for any normal questioning. It’d be more in line with a full-on interrogation. Considering Nadia and Lydia were still with me, my first order of business had to be seeing the pope, followed by gathering information.

“In any case, I have important information to report, so I’d like to have my

audience with Her Holiness first. She's the only one I answer to."

"Then I'm afraid we'll have to do this the hard way." Catherine rested her hand on her sword. "Unless you think you've got the guts to get past me."

Something about her was a little more aggressive than normal today. Wait, she specifically said "me." Not "us." Was she baiting me into a match?

"This is starting to sound a little hostile. Correct me if I'm wrong, but are you implying the knights could subdue me?"

"Arrogant tonight, are we? I'm implying I could subdue you."

Yep. Yeah. She was baiting me into a one-on-one. In fact, she was probably setting the stage for me to show off and scare away the other knights, all while giving herself an alibi. She'd be able to say she'd done her best to stop me, and I just might make it to the pope's chamber. Clever plan.

"I have no intention of hurting a fellow member of the Church, but I do have every intention of seeing the pope, regardless of what the executives want."

"I'll take that as your answer, then."

"I'm sure you're glad to hear it. Hell, those knights that've been shooting me nasty looks over there can join if they want."

"Oh? Is that a taunt?"

"It's a suggestion, actually. Those sorry excuses for knights won't last a second if you don't come at me with all you've got."

Catherine grinned. "Your head's gotten awfully big over the last few months."

I put some distance between us, took out the Illusion Sword, and imbued it with magic. "The simplest solutions are usually the best when neither side wants to compromise."

"Agreed. Just don't take this personally."

It had been a long time since I last felt the tingling in my fingers moments before a duel, a sensation I had become intimately familiar with during my time training in the Labyrinth of Wiles with Brod and Lionel. This wasn't a real fight, so I anticipated Catherine holding back. But the look in her eye said otherwise.

Sweat trickled down my back. Excitement welled in my stomach. A smile crept across my face. I could hardly recognize myself.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Catherine said, taunting me.

“Hm. Why don’t I start us off with a taste of my new power? Maybe it’ll make you give up and spare us the trouble. *Flame Blade.*”

I held up the Illusion Sword and swung it towards an empty area of the field. A small dragon of fire flew out of the blade, collided with the earth a distance away, and erupted into a pillar of flame. The knights with the nasty looks suddenly got a lot more meek at the sight of it.

“Impressive,” Catherine remarked.

“I practice. But that’s not all. *Protect me, Holy Dragon! Carry me, Thunder Dragon!*”

Suddenly, everything went quiet. Catherine was Captain of the Knights and a more than capable fighter, but she wasn’t as stalwart as Lionel or as agile as Brod. And she certainly didn’t have the raw power of multiple dragons or the magical aptitude of Olford. Plus, this wasn’t a fight to the death, so I wasn’t afraid. Catherine’s eyes widened as I glowed gold. She couldn’t keep up with my intense speed and was soon wide open. I brought my blade to hers in an attempt to knock it away, but the moment the Illusion Sword made contact, it cut straight through the steel like butter. The fight was pretty much over at that point. The executives would be powerless to scold her when even their lackeys among the knights were frozen in place.

All those level-ups and the dragons’ power sure were something. Catherine’s knowledge of my abilities was pretty outdated, going back to when I was half the level I was now. For that matter, not even I had much of a grasp on my own abilities. It felt like the dragons were controlling me, not the other way around, so I still had work to do.

At any rate, the battle was over. When I dispelled the dragons’ power, sound returned to my ears. I turned around to head on over to the pope’s chambers, as per the unspoken rules of the duel, and the knights were in utter shock. Even the bad eggs. Every time our eyes met, they would shudder and avert their gaze. My victory had come as quite the surprise, it seemed. Nadia and Lydia

were similarly astonished, but quickly regained their composure and nodded before slipping through the crowd and rejoining me.

“This is why I went out of my way to ask Her Holiness to let me take an extended trip to Neldahl,” I said. *“Also, it is true that I’m no longer a healer. But for the record, that’s because I’ve become a sage.”*

The knights started to stir, whispers regarding my ascension to sagehood flying chaotically from their lips.

“Luciel,” Lumina called out amidst the clamor. *“You’re a sage?”*

“That’s right. I just needed to visit the City in the Sky to learn how to control my new abilities.”

She smiled. *“Thank goodness.”*

“I’m always training myself to the bone, sparring with my master and my companions, drinking Substance X... In fact, I think we’d all understand each other a little better if you guys gave the stuff a try.”

“That, I will have to refuse.”

The Valkyries nodded in agreement with their captain’s decision.

“Are you satisfied, Catherine?” I asked.

“I suppose I’ll have to be if you can split my sword in two before I can even blink. I couldn’t stop you if I tried.”

She was still in shock for sure, but this was the outcome she’d wanted, so her expression seemed to soften a little. She wouldn’t hold me back anymore.

I bowed politely. *“Then if you’ll excuse me, I have a report to make to Her Holiness.”*

I left the field and entered HQ through the nearby door. The moment it shut behind us, the sisters started to buzz.

“Are you sure this was the right place to reveal that you’ve become a sage?” Nadia asked.

“And won’t people use knowledge of the powers you showed off to try and develop a counterstrategy against you?” Lydia added.

“It was only a matter of time before the sage thing got out anyway,” I said. “And the rumors had gotten out of hand, so I needed to make an impression. Also, if anyone does come up with a counter to me, I’ll just have to keep getting stronger.”

It wouldn’t be easy coming up with a way to go up against *that*, and by the time someone had, I’d be in an entirely different league. Come to think of it, maybe Brod and the others were starting to rub off on me a little too much...

As for Catherine, I’d completely disarmed her, so hopefully she wouldn’t catch any flak, and it wasn’t like the grumpier knights had been itching to jump in for the executives either.

“True, the rumors needed dealing with,” Nadia admitted.

“Things are going to get busy, sir.”

“What’s new?” I joked.

Nadia expressed concern while Lydia looked excited about the prospect of what was to come. The nuances in their personalities were amusing to notice.

With frivolities on my mind, we began walking towards the pope’s chambers.

02 — Executive Action

We didn't find so much as a single person on our way to the pope. Something about it didn't feel natural, and I wondered about who the mastermind might be as we arrived. After purifying myself just in case, I knocked on the door.

No reply came. Instead, the door opened. Estia poked her head out. "Enter," she said.

It was clearly the Spirit of Dusk, not Estia herself. I entered silently, and what met us was a sight beyond words. The normally pristine, elegant chamber looked like bandits had come through and ransacked the place. Things were scattered about, and Her Holiness was simply among it, her face exposed. I glanced around, but her attendants were nowhere to be seen. Estia and Forêt Noire were the only others present, along with one unexpected woman: Rosa, from the dining hall.

There were a million things I wanted to ask, but I began with my report, if only to clear my thoughts. I knelt and lowered my head like usual. "I, along with my companions Nadia and Lydia, have returned from Neldahl."

"At ease, Luciel. And you as well, ladies. I must begin with an apology," Her Holiness said.

"Pardon?" I instantly lost my train of thought. "What for?"

"For failing to head off the rumors, of course, but also for summoning you back so imprudently." She lowered her head.

The fault lay with me, though. I was the one who'd lost my class and magic. And whoever had leaked it was more than likely someone with a grudge against me and who had something to gain from the ensuing chaos. As far as I was concerned, there was no need for her to apologize. Frankly, it just made things awkward.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing for placing the Church in such a difficult situation."

"It simply gladdens me to see you returned safely."

“Of course, Your Holiness. Although, we were surprised to find ourselves in the training field.”

“A sentiment I share. One would normally be transported back to the magic circle they first departed from.”

“Er...”

Were we, like...not supposed to have made it back at all? Monsieur Luck and Sir Preme Luck had pulled through yet again. We would have to work under the assumption that someone had tampered with the teleportation circles.

“I know not what went wrong. Investigations revealed no traces of tampering.”

“I see. Then it’ll be difficult to pin down what happened.”

From my point of view, the Executive Division was looking awfully fishy for conveniently having the knights stationed as if they’d known where I was going to end up. But I didn’t have proof.

“I will continue to make inquiries.”

“That would be best,” I said. “I always thought you were the one who commanded the Knights of Shurule, but Catherine informed me of an entity called the Executive Division.”

“Indeed. Dongahar and Bulteuse, both of whom you surely recall, are members of the branch.”

“Are they? I almost didn’t believe my eyes when I saw a platoon of knights coming to greet me the moment we arrived.”

Both Dongahar and Bulteuse had been central to the creation and passing of the healing guidelines. I’d had no idea they were executives. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, maybe their goal hadn’t been to throw me in a cell, but to simply decipher the truth from the lies regarding the gossip going around.

“Knights greeted you? Rosa spoke of activity throughout the castle. But how did they know when you would return? It couldn’t be...”

That was what I wanted to know. Lord Reinstar’s shadow loomed in every corner of this place—it was his legacy—and Her Holiness lived here, so it stood

to reason that there was something in place to protect her.

I glanced at Rosa. She wasn't the same, cheerful woman I was so used to seeing behind the counter. She looked exhausted.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked me. "You're without your magic, I hear, and some of the knights were muttering their plans to throw you in chains. I'll do whatever I can if you need to flee the city."

Rosa was evidently one of the few to know of the rumors and feel sympathy rather than spite, which was a nice change. She didn't seem to know that I'd become a sage, though. The pope had kept it under wraps pretty well.

"I appreciate the concern, but rumors are just rumors. Not to worry," I assured her.

"That may be, but people don't often care much for truth." Rosa spoke with a distant gaze. "The nastier the lie, the worse off the victim's left when all's said and done."

Perhaps she spoke from experience.

"Did you perchance cross paths with Catherine on your way here?" the pope asked. "I thought she might have come bearing news with you."

See? I knew she was still her retainer. Something really didn't sit right about Catherine prioritizing the Executive Division when she'd gone undercover to expunge corruption in the Knights of Shurule on direct orders from the pope. Her Holiness could nullify any contract binding her, so it couldn't have been that.

"First, about my magic, Rosa," I began. "I can still heal just fine, and I assuaged those worries with a demonstration not too long ago. But they still insisted that I follow them to the Executive Division, so Catherine baited me into a one-on-one to slip away. It's possible she's keeping her distance to avoid suspicion. Or it's partly my fault for...going a little overboard."

Oddly enough, Rosa's eyes only widened in shock when I mentioned fighting Catherine. Not at the part about me still having my magic.

"Ah, so you've proven claims of your lack of holy magic groundless while

simultaneously demonstrating that you've achieved sagehood," said the pope. "Efficient."

"Exactly. They seemed confused from all of the hearsay, so I thought making things simple would be to our benefit."

"It was certainly practical. You mentioned having gone... 'overboard,' was it? Does your duel have something to do with Catherine's absence?"

"I used my newfound powers against her and accidentally cut her sword in two. It seemed to frighten the other knights, so I left the training field quickly. It was an awkward situation."

The pope gasped. "Divines! You severed *Catherine's* blade? That is no small feat." She then fell into thought.

Aw, crap. Was her sword valuable? Was I gonna have to compensate her for it? Meanwhile, as I agonized internally, a certain someone showed up out of nowhere to bite me on the head.

"Hi, Forêt... Bite my head later, please. We're in the middle of something here."

Forêt did not stop nibbling. If anything, she only did it harder, begging me for attention. She must have been pretty stressed. Her Holiness gave me an exasperated look, so I gave in and surrendered to my equine companion's gnawing.

"She certainly adores you," the pope commented. "At any rate, shall we return to the topic at hand? Luciel, what say you regarding our current situation?"

"I think we have a severe lack of intel," I said. "All we can do is guess, and the best I can presume is that the person—or people—who started spreading the rumors really don't like me. And there might be a mastermind behind it all calling the shots. Without any leads, though, it's anyone's guess as to who that could be."

"Then we find ourselves fighting a war of information."

"Before we get to that, what happened to this place? Why's it such a mess?"

“A leak was discovered,” Estia—or rather, the Spirit of Dusk inhabiting her body—explained. “An undetectably meager amount of mana was found to be escaping during arclink crystal communication.”

“You mean that someone was listening in?”

“I do. Any words shared via arclink were all but public to anyone with the means to hear them.”

That would imply that someone in the Church was acting directly against the pope, possibly even hoping to undermine her power. Either that or a foreign agent was meddling. Or maybe only I was their target. I’d heard about the risk back in Neldahl, so all things considered, I wasn’t very shocked to learn it had actually happened.

“Are arclink crystals the only explanation for the leak?”

“All who enter this room are bound by contract and thus unable to share information discussed in this chamber,” the pope explained.

And the place was probably magically soundproofed.

“I see. Apologies for interrupting. Please continue.”

“As for the mess,” the spirit went on, “what you see is simply the result of our search for any sort of magic item that may have assisted in creating the leak.”

“Did you find anything?”

The spirit pointed to the floor by the entrance. Several cracked arclink crystals no larger than a baseball were scattered there.

“They’re broken,” I remarked.

“We found several. I investigated each of the attendants with my spirit magic but could not find a culprit.”

She breezed past the explanation, but I surmised the chaos was her doing. No doubt the attendants would assume it was Forêt’s fault, though. Really, I felt bad for both of them. To the spirit’s credit, she had noticed the leak even before the pope, and she communicated through those crystals all the time. It was a good thing I’d left them behind.

“How is Estia, by the way?” I asked.

“I sense no anomalies in her mind. She is well enough to take the reins, so to speak.”

The certainty in the spirit’s expression was reassuring.

“That’s good. Your Holiness, what do you intend to do once we discover who the eavesdropper is? Or the one who bugged the chamber?”

“That, I am still unsure of,” she replied. “Only Catherine or those of the rank of bishop or greater can enter this place. Or those I summon personally, of course.”

“That certainly makes a lot of important people very suspicious.”

“Indeed. Though I would prefer to avoid a witch hunt, grave as the situation is.”

The pope hung her head. Her unwillingness to take drastic measures was definitely a compromising stance to take, though I did understand why she would hesitate to point fingers at her peers. It was that same kind nature that had allowed me to take leave in Neldahl for so long. And then there was the possibility that whoever had planted the bug was acting with good intentions. I’d done a lot of good for the Church and the Healer’s Guild, sure, but if the rumors turned out to be true, it wouldn’t have just been my reputation at stake. Shurule itself would be partly to blame, and it stood to reason that someone might want to avoid that outcome. It was a difficult prospect to imagine, but we had to consider every angle.

“Let’s put aside the matter of the eavesdropping for now,” I said. “Whoever did it was unquestionably out of line, but we don’t even know the motive.”

“So we do nothing?” the spirit pressed. I sensed a spike in her mana.

“Only for the time being. I think finding the one responsible for spreading the rumors about me should take precedence.”

“Have you any leads?” the pope asked.

“I do. The knights and the Executive Division. Would you be willing to give me permission to conduct an investigation?”

“Is this not effectively the same thing as searching for the source of the leak?”

“Some of the knights were doing a bad job of hiding their distaste for me when I met them earlier. I’d like to question them and ask why they believed the rumors so fervently.”

“Well, I can answer that,” Rosa interjected. “Jealousy. A young man in his twenties rising through the ranks faster than men who’ve worked their entire lives? And then he rebuilds the Yenice Healer’s Guild and slays a dragon. This isn’t your first bout of ill gossip. I’ve heard plenty of talk at dinner tables from those who accused you of having formed a covenant with demons or the Wicked One.” She frowned and looked away. “Always quick to assume.”

“I’m sure jealousy is part of it, but that doesn’t feel like enough to fully explain why they were swayed so easily.”

Rosa looked at me with a sad face. “You have two kinds of enemies, sir. The first are those who fell from ‘grace’ after your reforms usurped them. The second are men of pride who take offense to your unparalleled skill in holy magic.”

“You think they’d have believed *any* rumor? Regardless of what it was?”

“Of course not. But I’m saying that your disappearance created the perfect environment for tall tales of all kinds. Especially bad. And they would be free to spread like wildfire without you present to refute them.”

“This mastermind must be pretty clever, then.”

“I would imagine so. A tiny bit of malice goes a long way in amplifying existing gossip into massive scandals. Regardless of how much someone might trust you, all it takes is a little bit of doubt to crack the foundation.”

I sensed that it wouldn’t be wise to press this issue with her any further. So I turned to Her Holiness. “Who among the executives is responsible for organizing Catherine and her knights?”

“Dongahar,” she answered. “Bulteuse acts as his assistant. Granhart, too, is a member of the division.”

Yeah, Granhart being with them made sense. He was as stoic as a statue but

had a heart for justice. He couldn't have been involved in any espionage—he didn't strike me as the subtle type. Bulteuse, on the other hand, had been captain of the templars before an injury forced him to resign. He'd been aiding Dongahar in politics ever since, the way I heard it. I had a few apologies to make for all the chaos these rumors had caused. But first...

"I think I have the gist," I said. "May I ask a favor, Your Holiness?"

"Speak it."

I smiled. "Would you rescind my title as S-rank for the day?"

The air was instantly sucked out of the room.

"Absolutely not!" the pope cried. "Without you, the Church—" The strength in her voice trailed off. "We'd..."

Her Holiness, for lack of a better word, was awfully soft. It was easy to imagine why the knights had been placed under the command of the Executive Division, assuming the branch hadn't just politicked their way into power. Either way, this surely wasn't the future Lord Reinstar had had in mind when he'd made his own daughter the pope, and if he knew about the pain she was going through right now, he'd be rolling in his grave. The thought almost made me grin, but Forêt Noire and the Spirit of Dusk were giving me some angry vibes. I probably needed to do something about that.

"If you rescind my rank, you can then assign me directly to you as a sage," I said.

"You would be subjecting yourself to even greater criticism and attention," the pope warned.

"I mean, I already made the reveal to the knights, and it would be a simple matter to just replace the bad rumors with talk of my sagehood."

"This is true, but I cannot weigh you down with yet another burden."

"Whoever's behind all this, the fact that I'm back *and* a sage probably has them panicking. Word's going to get out at some point anyway, so we should use this chance to swing back."

What I really wanted was to pack it in and say screw it. But I was aiming to be

an honest and dependable guy here.

“When would you want the announcement to take place?” Her Holiness asked.

“That depends on how our opponent acts next. Their plan likely only accounted for me returning *without* being a sage.”

“What makes you think they’ve plotted to such a degree?”

“Because the only way to fix an S-rank gone rotten is to replace him with another S-rank healer.”

“Preposterous. I would never allow such a thing.”

I appreciated the thought, but realistically, she wouldn’t have much power against a movement with so much momentum behind it. As long as the Executive Division wielded authority, the pope’s own power would be that much weaker. It wouldn’t be hard to keep her in the dark either.

“But would you be able to veto an appeal to the nation? What if they justified it as a matter of national security? What if they said that it was to protect *me*? That I’d merely go into hiding until the heat died down? Would you really be able to reasonably fight an argument like that?”

She fell silent and hung her head. For all I knew, she’d experienced that very tactic in the past. We were clueless about the culprit’s identity or motives. Still, we had to consider the possibility that we were up against a large organization. Something capable of manipulating information on a massive scale. There was really no telling, so we had to be ready for anything. Thankfully, my demonstration back at the training field seemed to have clued quite a few people into the fact that the rumors had been in bad faith. All I had to do was think of this as a bad PR scandal. As long as I cleared my name reasonably and properly, I’d be able to earn the people’s trust back and more.

“Just to be sure, the Church hasn’t made any official statements on anything, have we?” I asked.

“No. When I was asked about you directly, I simply told them I had given you leave to visit Neldahl for your work on rebuilding the Yenice Healer’s Guild.”

I had made that request to her before I'd left for Grandol and everything had happened. So there were no inconsistencies there.

"Do you think any guilds could have taken independent action based on the rumors?"

"Unlikely. We maintain ties via arclink, so if anything were to happen, I would be made aware of it."

"Is the Executive Division in charge of that? Also, are you acquainted with all the guildmasters?"

"Unfortunately not. My familiarity with them extends only to signing their names on official decrees. Foreign guildmaster assignments are headed by Mardan and Dongahar. I apologize."

"No need for apologies. Just wondering."

"Regardless..."

My mind was working overtime trying to formulate the best possible way to use our current situation, and the path forward only seemed to point to meeting this Executive Division before anything else. It was a trip I would have rather taken with my bodyguards, Brod and Lionel, but it wasn't like these were my enemies...were they?

"I'll have to speak with the executives, but for the time being, I think we should wait until we announce my sagehood before bringing any judgment down on the culprit."

"Truly?"

"I believe that, assuming they're within the Church itself, their feelings for Shurule must be just as strong as your own, Your Holiness. If a little more twisted."

"Then you agree I ought to be assisting you," the pope argued.

"Actually, I have something else in mind for you."

"And that is?"

"I want you and the Spirit of Dusk to investigate HQ for any other strange

mana or miasmic tools like the ones that were being used to eavesdrop on arclink communications.”

“We certainly could do that, I suppose...” The pope looked expectantly at the spirit.

But the spirit closed her eyes and shook her head. “Fluna’s mana is too vast for even me to hide sufficiently. And the absence of it within this chamber would alert certain individuals.”

The spirit had mentioned that she had been unable to detect the mana leak before, but apparently that wasn’t the fault of her abilities. Her Holiness’s mana was just so “loud” that it made it difficult to notice more subtle anomalies. So something else must have tipped the spirit off to the arclink crystal leak. She never said what it was, though, so it probably wasn’t worth mentioning.

Also, what was up with the pope having immense amounts of mana that needed concealing? Knowing Lord Reinstar, he’d probably min-maxed her stats and skills or something during her upbringing.

A question came to mind. “What do you do when you travel abroad?” I asked.

The pope cast her eyes down. “My father erected a very powerful barrier around the Holy City. Should I leave, its power would fail,” she replied sadly.

Like a princess locked in a tower. I’d known Lord Reinstar was a bit of a doting parent, but this felt a bit excessive. Never being able to leave your home out of fear that it would be destroyed was just cruel. And yet Her Holiness had abided it all these years.

“Why would Lord Reinstar do something like that?”

“It was his and my mother’s doing, to be precise. They created the shield as a measure to protect us from demons and the Wicked One.”

She spoke with pride, but it still sounded more like a curse than a blessing. Also, something didn’t add up.

“With a barrier that powerful, how did a labyrinth form here? I find it hard to believe that someone like Reinstar, with all his abilities, would be that careless.”

He’d spoken of his daughter back in Rockford with a disgusting amount of

adoration. He would have taken every measure imaginable to protect her from all manner of threats, from labyrinths to the Wicked One himself. Or had the stories exaggerated his capabilities?

The truth was not so simple.

“The labyrinth... The location it occupies was once home to my chamber, living quarters, and several research facilities regarding magic and medicine. Time and extensive use, however, took its toll, and dozens upon dozens of requests were made to have the area expanded. There was little for it but to acquiesce.”

The pope closed her eyes and struggled to continue. I already had a bad feeling about this.

“I continued to spend my days within these walls when construction began. Until one day when I deigned to venture out to refresh my mind. The barrier surrounding the city, extending well underground, vanished. Some time later, construction was completed, and as we were preparing for the opening ceremony, a spiral of darkness was discovered. It gradually enveloped the structure, and thus the labyrinth was born.”

So that was why she wasn't just bound to HQ. She *refused* to leave HQ. It was tragic, really. I also had a hard time believing that something made by Lord Reinstar would decline with age, so those expansion requests had to have been selfishly motivated. Although I didn't know why someone had let the pope leave in the first place, it was clear that the experience weighed heavily on her mind.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“You were not told.”

Also, an opening ceremony warranted commissioning people from abroad. Surely not all of them could have been tight-lipped enough to keep quiet about a labyrinth in the Holy City forever, and there were ways around contracts even if they'd been bound to secrecy. The fact that it hadn't gotten out was pretty dang suspicious. Perhaps it had been the work of the Executive Division (assuming they weren't the bad guys).

In my case, unfortunately, the cat was already out of the bag and three blocks down the road by now. Too late to make it go away. So this organization must have had other ways to do damage control, possibly including drastic measures like assassination should the rumors prove true.

And then it hit me. I wasn't the only one in danger. Not that I expected Brod or Lionel's group in Yenice to get taken out by a dagger in the back, but the possibility was there. And that was enough to unnerve me.

I was one to...overthink things at times, but I still wanted to play it safe. "My current plan is to visit the Executive Decision, Your Holiness. But circumstances depending, I may have to leave the city," I said.

"Does something concern you?" she asked.

"Yes. I'd like you to send word to every Healer's Guild and every regiment currently on deployment about my becoming a sage. Can this be done?"

"With ease."

"Thank you. Rosa, if you could spread it around among the people at HQ."

"Consider it done," Rosa replied.

"Appreciated," I said. "Spirit of Dusk, assuming I have to leave the city, I want you to keep an eye on anyone who wants to keep me here or tries to send someone after me. Can you do it?"

The spirit nodded silently.

"Why would you have pursuers?" the pope asked.

"I'm sensing the people who don't like me have been getting bolder. Maybe because I've become a sage. That's really all I have to go on, though."

The knights who'd given me the stink eye hadn't changed their attitude even after I'd proved I could still use holy magic. The executives were on my mind too, of course. It just didn't seem like they were my only problem at the moment.

"You're certain about leaving Dusk with me? You may have more use for her, given the tribulations you're sure to face."

A fair point. But still. “I think you’ll need her powers more than me. She’ll keep you safe from anyone who tries to talk their way around you to get what they want.” The pope looked like she wanted to say something, but I turned away from her to address Nadia and Lydia. “You two should stay with her as well. Keep her safe until I get back.”

The sisters looked at each other and smiled.

“Oh, but we’re going with you, sir,” Nadia stated. “Draconis’s orders.”

“We’re bound to only make things worse if we stick around,” Lydia added.

Forêt neighed as if declaring she’d be joining me as well. I would have been fine with her staying, though I did appreciate having her back. It would have made traveling difficult otherwise.

“I will watch over Fluna,” the spirit said. “Do try to be courteous to my sister while I’m away.”

I got the subtle hint that she wished she could tag along too. “I know. I leave Her Holiness to you.”

“Very well.”

“I’ll be there for her too,” Rosa chimed in. “I look forward to whatever brilliant plan you concoct.”

This was quite the motley crew, and yet I found myself oddly confident in them. Maybe.

I offered a bow, then turned back to the pope. “Do you have the hermit key I left with you, Your Holiness?”

“Right here.”

I took a moment to open it and let Forêt inside. “Okay, now we should make it look like I left Nadia and Lydia here to guard you. Can you two hide in the hermit coffins for a little while?”

“Sounds like you have an idea,” Nadia replied.

“As long as you clean them first, please,” Lydia requested.

Soon after, the Spirit of Dusk put the two to sleep, and off they went inside

the hermit coffins.

“I will contact you later, Your Holiness,” I said.

“I await good tidings.”

Departing the chamber, I soon realized I had absolutely no idea where the Executive Division was. So I headed towards the training field again and prayed that I’d meet someone along the way.

On my way to the training field, I found a few knights. When I bowed to them before speaking, though, they quickly scurried away. I was honestly taken aback by how on guard people were around me. Regardless, I continued in search of someone who would give me the time of day.

“Excuse me! I’m looking for the Executive Division. Could you show me where it is?”

The knights looked shocked for a moment but soon agreed to guide me there with poorly veiled smiles. I’d spent all my time in the southwest wing where the lodgings were, the pope’s chamber and the archbishops’ offices in the northwest wing, and the training fields towards the northeast. The Executive Division seemed to be situated in the southeast.

We came to the building, ascended and descended some stairs, and wound through convoluted hallways before we arrived at a door at the end of a hallway. It opened, and a familiar face came out.

“Oh, Catherine,” I said before turning to the knights, “thank you for showing me the way. I’ll be okay from here.” They departed without a word, disappearing behind the corner a ways down the corridor. “Kinda rude. Anyway, Catherine!”

I approached her, but she reached me first.

“Luciel! What are you doing here?” Catherine hissed.

“Uh, I finished reporting to Her Holiness, so I came to make sure the executives knew the rumors were lies. Was I not supposed to?”

“Listen, I know you think that sounds logical, but we’re still under orders to

arrest you.”

“Wait, the rumors haven’t been disproved?”

“They have. Everyone’s well aware that you’re a sage now.”

“Then what’s the deal?” I asked.

“A few executives consider your actions imprudent and ostentatious. They’re picking at everything they can, claiming you’ve obstructed the work of healers in foreign countries.”

“Wow, okay, that’s petty.”

“They don’t have to arrest you to force you to take an oath under contract. I was hoping you’d lay low with Her Holiness until things calmed down.”

“I was hoping to gather some information, but this changes things, I suppose. There was something else that needed my attention if you think I should disappear for a little while.”

“I’m sure they’ve already got the place surrounded. You’d better get ready for a fight.”

“These guys I barely know sure do hate me a lot.”

“I’ve been doing some digging, but I need more time to smoke out whoever’s scheming everything.”

“Sorry about all this. And for, y’know, our match earlier.”

“Don’t mention it,” Catherine said flatly. “So what’s your plan?”

“Fly away.”

“Um...pardon?”

“You didn’t know sages could fly? Sorry again, but mind handling the aftermath?”

Catherine sighed. “Fine. But no more after this. And you owe me.”



“Of course. *Be my wings and soar, Wind Dragon!*” I chanted.

All of a sudden, I felt light as a feather, as if I really had sprouted wings. I sensed presences all around the building, more than likely knights waiting to apprehend me. So I opened up a nearby window and shot right out. Shouting followed me from below, but I ignored it as I rose higher into the pitch-black sky.

03 — The First Job

It was the middle of the night, so I didn't have to worry about being spotted on landing, and even if someone did notice, there wouldn't be much to see through the darkness. Or so I thought.

"He fell outta the blasted sky?"

"Hey, that's Saint Weirdo!"

All I could do was smile awkwardly at the masses as I hurried to my destination: the Adventurer's Guild (gotta love businesses that never close). The moment I entered, several adventurers whipped their heads around, and then one after the other, they started to swarm me.

"Saint Weirdo, good to see ya!"

"Templars from the Church came by 'n told us ta haul ya off to the castle if you showed up. Pissed us off, so we tossed 'em downstairs."

"Hey, friend, even if you've lost your stuff, you always got a place adventuring with us."

"Buzz off; our party needs more front-runners. The Whirlwind's apprentice'll make a solid addition, I'd say."

Odd welcome aside, it was an immense relief to see so many people unquestionably on my side. Eventually, the commotion drew the attention of the guildmaster, Grantz.

"Been a while, Luciel," he said with a smile. "Glad you're still breathin'."

"For now," I replied. "I'm a bit of a fugitive at the moment because of the rumors, though."

"Yeah? We got a few nosy 'inquiries' aboutcha ourselves. So, is that divine punishment nonsense a load o' garbage or what?"

Grantz leaned in with keen interest. The other adventurers seemed to share his concern, silence suddenly dominating the guildhall while everyone waited for my answer.

“I wouldn’t call it ‘retribution.’ I guess you could say I overcame a divine *trial* and got myself new powers, so I was off learning how to control them,” I replied evasively.

Grantz, unsatisfied with my nonanswer, stepped closer. “Then the talk about you losin’ your job an’ magic an’ all that’s rubbish?”

“Maybe this’ll be easier. *Area High Heal.*”

Chanting loud enough for everyone to hear, I free cast the spell. Everyone’s wounds glowed white before closing up as if they’d never been there to begin with. According to the clamor that followed, it fixed a few bad backs and sore teeth as well.

“Quiet! Quiet, I said!” the guildmaster shouted. “Pal, am I crazy or did you go and get a boost? A *big* one.”

Grantz plopped a hand on my shoulder, and a mob of adventurers surrounded me. Suddenly, my feet weren’t touching the ground. This wasn’t going to be good.

Before I knew it, we were in the mess hall and a party was being held in my honor. The threat of pursuers still worried me, but I figured it wouldn’t be so bad to indulge in everyone’s goodwill for the moment.

“So, what’s with the Church losin’ its head over a rumor?” Grantz asked.

“It’s a specific faction within the Church, actually. My best guess is they assume the smoke must be coming from a fire, so to speak.”

Grantz sighed. “I’m not sayin’ bein’ famous means you can’t do no wrong, but who goes cutting ties like that over a little hearsay?”

“I agree. And now they’re after me over something entirely different, even after I’ve proven that I can still use holy magic. From their point of view, I guess it looks like I’ve shamed the Church simply by allowing rumors to spread around their S-rank healer.”

Angry groans and swears filled the room at once. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one frustrated with the government. I didn’t intend to go stirring up any more trouble, though, so I wanted the adventurers to help fix the damage that had

already been done.

“Oh, something I forgot to mention,” I said. “There is a bit of truth to the rumors. I’m not a healer anymore.”

“So you’re a...paladin now? A templar?”

I’d never get used to being the center of attention. Smiling nervously, I replied, “Overcoming that divine trial means I’m a sage now. Granted, holy magic is still pretty much the only thing I can do right.”

“WHAT?!” the entire room shouted simultaneously. It was kinda impressive, to be honest. Everyone swelled with excitement, and it warmed my heart.

Grantz tilted his head, however. “But you’d think the Church’d know the sorta standup guy you are more than anyone. Why’d they ever believe these sorts o’ rumors?”

“Beats me,” I replied. “Her Holiness is beside herself about all this. It seems like this faction is acting independently, and it could be a case of too much conflicting information reaching them at once. Of course, there could be a bit of malice thrown into the mix too.”

“And the bigwigs over there can get away bein’ that misinformed?”

“At the very least, I have allies. The pope, the Captain of the Knights, the Valkyries, not to mention the knights, staff, and other people I’ve come to know over the years. I’m hoping things will clear up eventually.”

“You do got a way o’ turnin’ things around wherever you go. Any particular reason you came to see us small folk at the guild?”

It was nothing special, really. I just knew I’d have a lot of allies here who would be willing to take a job from me.

“Well, I was curious about what you all thought of the situation. Now that that’s settled, though, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

Out of nowhere, the big, scary adventurers suddenly got coy. Grantz gave them a weird look.

“What is it?” he asked. “We’re up for just about anything.”

“I’d like you to look into the source of the rumors and how they spread. You don’t need to kidnap anyone—I’m just after information. I’ll pay ten platinum, to be allotted according to whoever has the most useful intel. The rest can be distributed equally to everyone else.”

“Whoa, hold on, you’re nuts. That much? To *everyone*? What’re you after?” Grantz asked skeptically. The welcoming atmosphere became one of doubt and suspicion.

“My life of peace and quiet is on the line here. I want to make the jerk responsible regret crossing me.”

“O-Oh. I... I see.”

“Also, if we can crack this case, HQ will get off my back and start going after the people who started this.”

“Fair enough. You wanna prove plain and simple that the rumors’re just rumors.”

“Exactly. And if you can spread the word that I was a victim of conspiracy while I was training my godly-given powers, I’ll have even more people on my side.”

“Can do,” Grantz asserted. “Ain’t no one I hate more than shits who take advantage o’ other people’s work ’n goodwill.”

Just about every adventurer in the room voiced their approval. After paying the ten platinum up front, I changed topics to something I hadn’t been able to ask about at HQ.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Have you heard anything about my master in Merratoni? Or Lionel in Yenice?”

“The Whirlwind? Fell pretty much off the map for about a month, but I hear he’s trainin’ newbies with some more practical lessons back at his place.”

I’d been most worried about him since hearing about the chaos going on, but he still had Gulgar and Galba with him. The part about him disappearing for a month was strange, though. According to Lord Wisdom, the rumors had only started to spread in Luburk a few weeks ago. The logical next step was

ascertaining when they'd begun circulating in Shurule.

"I'm glad to hear he didn't start rampaging," I said with relief. "On a different note, do you remember when you first caught wind of the rumors?"

"Bout two months ago, as I recall," the guildmaster answered. "Just laughed it off at the time, but things only got serious a month or so ago. Most folk brushed it off. Anyone who didn't just got riled up over turnin' ya into a full-fledged adventurer. Couldn't forget that mayhem if I tried."

"Yeah, gotta say I feel more at home with you guys than the Healer's Guild."

A cheer rose throughout the mess hall. And then Grantz finally addressed the elephant in the room.

"Why not just quit? Shoot for SSS-rank with us, Saint Weirdo. Or should I be callin' ya Sir Sage now?"

"What part of 'all I want is peace and quiet' do you people not understand?!"

My protests fell on deaf ears, however, as the adventurers began to chatter among themselves about their new weird and saintly sage.

"Whadda we call a guy like that? Saint Sage Weirdo doesn't roll off the tongue, does it?"

"True, but a sage who can't do nothin' but holy magic *is* pretty weird, if ya ask me."

"The guy's got a lot to work with, at least."

"Yeah, but this sage thing's on a whole different level. Hell, bein' on the run from the Church is already nuts."

The peanut gallery had their fun while Grantz and I hammered out the details of my job. All the while, I merely prayed for release from this nomenclature torment.

Grantz and I continued to discuss the job I'd be commissioning the Adventurer's Guild for, until he suddenly shot up.

"Something wrong?"

“Maybe. Stay here and work out the deadlines ’n terms o’ that job.”

“Can do.”

“Sorry ’bout this.”

The guildmaster hurried out of the mess hall. Maybe my arrival had interrupted him in the middle of something. I got to filling out the details on the commission form while I pondered my potential wrongdoing.

The rumors had spread abroad, but I kept the area of interest within the Republic of Saint Shurule. My gut told me that the culprit hadn’t anticipated them spreading so far in the first place, because assuming the motive here was to simply throw me under the bus, letting the lies expand so far would then put Her Holiness, the Church, and the entire guild under scrutiny. And something told me that either the pope or I was the primary target. Of course, if the objective *was* to undermine Shurule in its entirety, then they were doing a great job.

Extending the field of effect to beyond Shurule would probably open up a whole new can of worms, and I didn’t want to drag this out. The sooner this could all be resolved, the better.

Grantz returned just as I was finishing up the document. Before I could ask what had distracted him, he presented a large arclink crystal. He must have gone to get it for me. Brod already had a personal one, but now would have been a bad time to mention that.

“Sorry ’bout that. You asked about the Merratoni guildmaster, yeah? This here’ll connect to every Adventurer’s Guild on the map. Feel free to use it.”

Nice guildmasters really were the best guildmasters.

“Thanks. I’ve got one myself, but it doesn’t connect to the guild.”

“Only people who do are folks who’ve got secrets to keep or money to burn,” the guildmaster said.

Huh. I never really thought about it, but I did own a lot of wealth from the things I’d gathered in labyrinths alone. And I did technically own a business in Yenice. Personally, I blamed Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian for my skewed concept of

value for arclink crystals.

“I bet it’d be convenient to lower the cost of them to the point that the average person could own one. Don’t you think?” I asked.

“What I think is that’d cause a whole new brand o’ hell. Folks’d use ’em for crime.”

He had a point. Cell phone equivalents in this world would be bound to cause more trouble than expected. There were risks—risks that could potentially lead to death—but there was still value in the idea.

“That’s possible,” I admitted, “but it’s up to the individual whether a tool is used for good or evil.”

“Well you’re gonna need the stone of an A-rank monster or higher and a top-class artificer to make a single one. And most adventurers got better things to be spendin’ money and materials on, so it’d be a hard sell to that crowd.”

“Ah, and that’s why criminals would take advantage of it first. Makes sense.”

Most adventurers would rather spend money on weapons and such. Grantz took a detour around the counter and stopped in front of me, placing the crystal between the two of us.

“A moment, if ya will,” he said, closing his eyes with his hands around the orb. He was frozen for about thirty seconds or so until the connection was made and he began to speak. “This is Grantz from the Holy City. Your guildmaster in?” Pause. “Right, sorry for the late call. Got someone who wants to talk to the Whirlwind, and they don’t take no for an answer.”

Sounded like my master was around. Which made sense, given it was the middle of the night. Grantz opened his eyes and guided my hand to the crystal.

A second later, Brod’s voice was echoing inside my head. *“I’m not just twiddling my thumbs here, Grantz. I got training to do.”*

“Yeah, yeah. Luciel, feel free to chime in,” Grantz offered.

Although a little taken by surprise, I was about to do just that when Brod replied first. Loudly. *“Luciel?! You there?!”*

“Long time no see, Master. I just got back from Neldahl—a little ahead of

schedule because of rumors that I'd lost my holy magic. Didn't have much time to polish my other affinities, so we'll have to put them to the test some other time." I figured he'd catch my drift.

"What happened?"

Yup, as expected. I began to explain the events of the past several months. "After some struggling, I finally managed to become a sage, but I still haven't learned how to control other types of magic."

"Sounds like a job for training. So you heard about the rumors, huh?"

"They're why I had to cut my trip short. Seems like someone, or multiple people, maybe, want me gone."

"I've been looking into it with Galba. Best leads we've got point to either corruption in the Church, the phantom going around Illumasia callin' himself the Lion of War, or an odd surge of demon sightings and mass amnesia in the empire and Blanche."

"Wait, you're already on it?" And not only did he know about the fake Lion, but he'd already begun investigating it *and* the demons as well as this mass amnesia thing? Galba's intel network continued to terrify me.

"Didn't have much to do but train these past three months. Some guys showed up in Merratoni spreading those rumors, and the moment they tried feedin' it to the locals, they got what was coming to 'em. Full course of Gulgar's 'special' recipes."

They'd even captured someone involved already? Having his stats reset sure didn't do much to keep my master from outdoing himself. The fact that he'd gone to such lengths for me spoke to his faith that I'd restore the powers I had lost, and the way the citizens of Merratoni had stood up for me was genuinely heartwarming. I honestly had to hold back tears of gratitude.

"What would you say is our next move, then?" I asked.

"Depends on how you want to play it," he replied.

"What I want?" He was stepping back to yield center stage to me. I could feel it.

"This is between you and the Church—a part of the Church that's reared its ugly head specifically because you came into the picture. This is all because of them and whatever accomplices they've got."

So it was a faction within the Church. I had to play it carefully and learn everything Brod had discovered. And then I had to figure out what it was I wanted to do. It occurred to me that I hadn't even taken a moment to consider the end goal of all this. I'd expected Her Holiness to just take care of everything like always.

"Tell me everything you know."

"Get your ass here and I'll do that."

"I was just about to head over there, actually. Had a feeling you guys were maybe being watched."

"Works out, then. I've got something to ask you and the Lion too, so pick them up on the way if you can."

Seemed he needed quite a few hands for something.

"Got it. I should be there the day after tomorrow, but chances are something's going to come up and make us late."

"Right. What about those two girls from Blanche?"

"They're with me. Why?"

Granted, they were technically asleep. In coffins.

"Good. Have to ask them something."

"That's ominous. Well, wish us luck on the way there."

"No apprentice of mine needs luck."

"Let's hope."

"Well, thanks for the call, Grantz."

"My pleasure. Anything for my old student o' the kitchen," the guildmaster said.

"Later."

Grantz cut the connection.

“I didn’t know multiple people could use the same crystal,” I remarked.

“Kind of a pain, though, since ya can’t open calls in a group. Anyway, who’s next?”

I didn’t actually need his help since I had a crystal of my own, but no reason I couldn’t make use of his kindness.

“The Yenice Adventurer’s Guild. Assuming they’ll even be there.”

“Might as well give it a try.”

Grantz initialized the connection. Meanwhile, the intense debate over my new nickname was reaching dangerous levels of fervor. I, however, elected to ignore it. For better or worse.

04 — Catching Up

After the call with Brod, Grantz tried to get in contact with the Yenice Adventurer's Guild. Thirty minutes of waiting, though, and no one showed up. Arclink crystals didn't have any sort of call history, so you had to just wait around for someone to pick up. It was pretty inconvenient, as far as I was concerned, but it probably wasn't all that bad to the people of this world.

Now, what was I to do, supposing the culprit was from the Church itself? Brod had placed the responsibility of acting at my feet. For my own growth and maturity, if I had to guess. But if you asked me how I felt about the Church as an organization, I wouldn't have a very interesting answer. What I cared about were the people, not the system. As long as it wasn't hurting anyone, I really didn't care.

After learning holy magic, it hadn't been the Healer's Guild that had taken me in. It was the Adventurer's Guild that had trained me and given me a place to live. And then I'd come to the Holy City to conquer a labyrinth, reformed the profession of healing, studied clinic administration at Merratoni, then revived the guild in Yenice. So while I was technically a part of the Church, it didn't feel like I'd ever worked *for* the Church, and aside from a few exceptions, I had no real real peers or coworkers who I could call friends. If I wanted to actually see every facet of the organization I was a part of, I had to make an effort to learn more.

Just then, Grantz muttered something. We'd finally connected to Yenice. I held my hand out to the crystal.

"Then the rumors really were false," Guildmaster Goldhus's voice echoed. *"I knew it was preposterous for the dragons' chosen one to be subject to divine punishment. That's a relief."*

"You heard about 'em already, huh?" Grantz asked.

"They reached us only recently, but not a soul lends them any credence. This talk of sagehood, though. This I have to tell everyone."

Please don't. I beg of you. But before I could ask Grantz for permission to

speaking, Goldhus continued.

“Really. What god would go out of their way to torment a freak capable of drinking Substance X? I’d sooner believe he was simply undergoing training to fight without magic.”

Goldhus laughed and Grantz’s eyes went wide. He looked at me, smiling awkwardly. The gods may not have gone out of their way to torment me, but they were probably having a good laugh about this situation. Boy, if that guy knew who was listening.

Grantz nodded at me, giving the okay to speak.

“Sorry for being a freak, I guess,” I chimed in. “I’m glad you’re well enough to bad-mouth people to their face, Goldhus. How’s Jeiyas?”

“M-M-Mister Luciel!” he stammered. *“I-I was not bad-mouthing you! I was merely praising your ability to overcome the trials placed before you and become a sage, you see! And rest assured, the dragonewt brothers are well!”*

Instantly recognizing my voice, Goldhus immediately whipped himself into shape. I wasn’t here to bully him, so I put a pin in it and moved on.

“I’m just pushing your buttons. I was curious about how Lionel and the others are. Also about the school and the construction of my estate.”

“Everything’s proceeding smoothly! Thanks to the work of you and Galba, we’ve firmly established that corruption will not go unpunished. An A-rank adventurer party by the name of the Lineage of the White Wolf is acting in place of Galba as assistants to the representatives, keeping others in line where needed. Luciel and Co. is increasing employment and making strides in equal opportunity for all races.”

The White Wolf? That was Bazan and his friends. I hadn’t seen them in forever. Nadia and Lydia would also be interested to hear about them. And my company was single-handedly increasing employment? I’d only been gone for about a year and I was already too scared to ask for more details.

“With the Lineage of the White Wolf around, you probably don’t have many issues with crime.”

“Oh, absolutely. Until now, only certain races ever mingled with each other, but the school and public projects have given everyone the chance to interact more. The people are learning about what makes everyone unique, and they’ve come to respect each other. Unrest is at an all-time low, and we have you to thank.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “Are the Healer’s Guild and Order of Healing doing okay?”

“The guild has become something of a gathering spot for children and adventurers. Our new families have been making much use of it. Oh, also, they supposedly received official orders of some kind from Headquarters. To my knowledge, they tossed it, though. Something about a conspiracy?”

New families, huh? I was honestly more interested in knowing who the lucky couples were than some boring document from the Church.

“You sure know a lot about the guild.”

“Oh, I often find myself involved in sparring matches with your companions. Half of my week tends to be spent in the medical district. We’ve actually sparked a bit of a gambling problem among citizens who’ve taken to betting on our fights.” Goldhus laughed nervously.

It sounded like everything was going well and that Lionel and the others were fine. Maybe Yenice could make use of an official fighting arena at some point.

“So, Goldhus,” I said, “I actually got in touch with you because I need you to pass something on to Lionel.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Tell them the rumors could spark conflict with a faction within the Church. The Yenice branch is unrelated, by the way, so by all means, keep supporting them. And tell them to start making their way to Merratoni. Oh, also that I’ve become a sage.”

“I’ll let them know immediately.”

“Thank you.” I waited some time for a reply. But none came. “He...hung up.”

“Would appear so. All’s well in Yenice, anyhow.” Grantz removed his hand

from the crystal, poured a cup of alcohol, and took a swig. “So the guys on your tail...it’s just one specific group?”

“It’s hard to say,” I replied. “It’s not like I don’t have more than enough enemies among the other healers as it is. Combined with other members of the Church, there might be quite a few people with an axe to grind.”

There was no point wasting effort trying to make everyone like me. For every enemy I had, there were two more people who would have my back no matter what.

“Sounds rough. Wanna grab some winks before ya head out? I could lend ya a room.”

“No need. The moon’s out, so I’m leaving tonight.”

“Somethin’ to eat for the road?”

“Maybe next time. Make it a feast.”

The longer I stayed, the higher the chance that I attracted trouble.

“I better see your mug back here soon,” the guildmaster growled.

“Of course. Here’s that commission form, by the way.”

Grantz took the paper and began to look it over. When he was finished, he returned nine platinum coins to me.

“Your change,” he said.

“You’ve got bad business sense, you know that?”

“The Adventurer’s Guild is about betterment. Helpin’ your fellow man. Growing. Adventurers don’t accept handouts.” He paused. “Not me, anyway.”

It was just like him to punctuate the statement with clarification. “Fair enough. I’ll take your word for it.”

“Want me to take ya to the edge o’ town?”

“No. They’re not going to be able to follow me. Anyway, this is where we part ways.”

“Do whatcha gotta do. Good luck.”

“Likewise.”

I stood up, turned on my heel, and was immediately met with a wall of grinning adventurers.

“Can I...help you?” I asked hesitantly.

“We’ve got a few suggestions for your new name,” a swordswoman replied. “We wantcha to pick one to let us use, Saint Weirdo!”

“I don’t recall ever giving permission for any of them.”

“Don’t be a party pooper. You don’t wanna worry yourself bald, do you? Anyway, the first one’s...”

I was rather fond of my hair, so I shut up. My first experience with male pattern baldness in my past life had been so traumatizing that I’d had to use some of my paid time off. This was an experience I would live happily without. I did have Extra Heal, which could probably regenerate hair roots, but I wouldn’t bet my scalp on it.

“Wait, what do you mean *first* one?” I demanded.

“We’ve got three. The first one’s ‘the Wise Reprisal.’”

Okay, that was actually kinda cool, though I didn’t like how ‘reprisal’ implied that I was in danger of being attacked or something. The name makes the man, after all.

“The second’s ‘the (Weirdo-With-Only-One-Kind-of-Magic) Cleric’!”

Was there something in there between “the” and “cleric”? I must’ve been hearing things. I would’ve felt weird going around having people call me ‘the Cleric,’ but at least it was better than Saint Weirdo.

“Okay, and the third—”

“There he is!”

Suddenly, two weary men appeared in templar armor. They didn’t look happy, but more so with the adventurers than me specifically. They must have come here looking for me only for the guild members to get in their way. The men looked young, and I didn’t recognize them from the training field.

The adventurers shot icy glares at the men, and they flinched. They hadn't done anything to me (yet), so I decided to throw them a bone.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"S-rank Luciel, you've been summoned to Church Headquarters by official decree!" one of them replied all the way from the door.

"We're very sorry, sir, but you will come with us, won't you? Please?" the other begged.

They looked utterly pitiful. I honestly felt a little bad for people like them who were just following orders despite personal misgivings.

"I've been summoned? Surely you know that I can cast holy magic just fine. And that I'm a sage now," I replied.

"Yes, sir," one of the templars said firmly. "But our superiors would still like to question you regarding the rumors. The Knights of Shurule have been ordered to deliver you."

They were visibly beaten up, so I silently cast Middle Heal and Purification. The knights were shocked at the sight of magic at first, but when they realized they had been healed, they took a knee.

"I know orders are orders, but can I convince you to look the other way this once? I need some time to investigate the rumors myself."

The two exchanged glances, stunned, and then nodded. At once, they both said, "Yes, sir."

"We stand with you, Mister Luciel," one declared.

"I trust that you will soon resolve these misunderstandings," stated the other.

They respectfully lowered their heads once more. It was for people like this, my allies in the Church, that I needed to go to Merratoni to get that information. The knights had probably been here for a while, and reinforcements would be coming sooner rather than later, so this was my cue.

"All right, well, until we meet again, everyone."

And so I put the guild behind me.

05 — Discoveries on a Detour

After confirming the coast was clear, I activated Physical Enhancement and dashed for the city gates. Thanks to my new strength and having become a sage, I made it in no time. A platoon of knights was waiting for me, however.

Figures.

Surely some of them were less than enthusiastic about their orders, like the pair from the guild, but I couldn't reasonably expect to make it through so many. And punching my way through would have *really* given them a reason to arrest me. I had to borrow the Wind Dragon's power again, which I'd been avoiding because I still didn't have it totally under control.

"Just focus," I told myself.

Slipping into an alley, I extended my senses and searched for somewhere free of soldiers to land once I'd taken off. The outer wall was free of presences, so that was my best bet. I probably could have jumped over it, but I wasn't in the mood to take chances. Plus, the lower I was, the easier they'd be able to spot me. I had to get as high as possible.

"Be my wings and soar, Wind Dragon!"

I felt the wind whip up around me, and kicked off the ground. My body ascended ten meters in an instant, then twenty, and even farther. Looking down on the Holy City, I was preparing to escape when I noticed several cloaked knights lurking on the outer wall where I'd previously sensed no one.

"Hiding themselves with magic tools?" I wondered. "That was close."

Their eyes were glued to the gates, so I slipped by. Although they'd seen me flee by air from HQ, they didn't know just how high I could go. Granted, I didn't either, but I didn't need to. My escape was a success.

About a hundred meters out from the Holy City, I finally landed again. The drain on my mana was getting to be too much, and I still had a journey to make. I activated Physical Enhancement and began to run. Once I was farther still from

the city, I pulled out the hermit key and turned it in the air. Forêt Noire trotted out.

“Think you can take us to Merratoni in the dark, girl?” I asked her. She brayed. “I know you can.” I stroked her neck and mounted her. “Let’s go.”

Forêt kicked into a gallop, unfazed by the darkness of night. I thought about waking up Nadia and Lydia so we could ride together, but we didn’t have any horses for them to ride. They’d have to sit tight until morning—assuming they didn’t get up all on their own before then. But I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

Forêt sped along faster than I’d ever ridden her, yet I hardly felt a bump. It was as if she were running on air. No doubt she would have left the competition in the dust, had there been any. Gratitude for my partner in my heart, I proceeded to occasionally cast Heal as we continued. Not that I could have let her run nonstop the whole way there, no matter how mystical or powerful the spirit possessing her was. And we still had to be cautious of our surroundings. We took several breaks to hydrate, rest, and clean up with Purification.

Eventually, the moon began to sink, and the first cracks of dawn peered over the horizon.

“Now that’s a sight,” I murmured. “Neldahl had a view to die for, but this sure isn’t any worse.” Forêt slowed her gait and began to walk, enjoying the sunrise. “You really do understand what I say. I’m kinda jealous that Her Holiness gets to talk to you.”

She neighed.

“Yeah, I know. Look, it’s the village we usually stay at. Not much farther now. Good work, partner.” I reached down to stroke her neck, and she stopped. Waiting for me to urge her towards town. “Everyone’s probably asleep right now, and we don’t have much reason to stop anyway.”

Just as I was about to direct Forêt around the village, the hermit key containing the hermit coffins flew out from the magic bag and turned on its own; then the door opened.

“Oh, that’s how it works. Didn’t think it’d pop out of a magic bag all on its

own.”

I’d always wondered about that, since you couldn’t store living things inside. Whatever space made up the hermit keys, it was entirely separate from the one inside the bag. Nadia and her sister soon drowsily staggered out.



“Good morning,” they said blearily.

“Morning. What’s got you both so tired?”

“The Spirit of Dusk’s magic is...very potent,” Lydia answered.

“Ah. I see.”

The spirit hadn’t mentioned that they’d be difficult to put under her spell, but it wasn’t hard to surmise. I dismounted, cast High Heal and Purification on Forêt, then cast Heal, Recover, and Purification on the sisters.

“Feel better?” I asked. Their complexions had improved, at least.

“Much,” Nadia replied, smiling.

“I’m good to go now,” Lydia said cheerfully.

Even Forêt neighed in reply before nibbling my head in what I could only assume was good cheer. I took it as a thank-you.

“Now that you two are up, we’ll have to get the carriage out,” I said. “Can you pull it, Forêt?”

She brayed, though much less happily than before, averting her eyes.

“You’d ask the Spirit of Dawn to pull a carriage?” Lydia said incredulously. “Why don’t we purchase a few horses at the town over there?”

“Agreed. We’d have much less freedom of movement in a carriage should a crisis arise,” Nadia concurred.

They made good points, so I started to reconsider. Forêt neighed again, as if to say, “Choose the wise option.”

“All right,” I acquiesced. “Forêt, you can rest inside the hermit key. We might need you at your fastest again, so make sure you’re up to it.”

Forêt walked into the extradimensional stable without a hint of protest.

“See you soon,” I said. She only flicked her tail at me before disappearing inside. “Okay, to the village. Do you two remember this one?”

“We...stopped here on our way to the Holy City, right?” Nadia asked uncertainly.

“Now that you mention it, it *does* look a little familiar,” Lydia added.

“We’re still far away and we did only visit once, I guess. And we were in a hurry at the time. This is the place where the demon incident was. I’d like to follow up on that and gather some information.”

“Yes, sir,” the sisters replied.

I remembered the battle, and how the mayor and villagers had become demons disguised among the innocents. According to Brod’s intel, Blanche might have been related, but I kept that to myself for now.

By the time we reached the village on foot, the sun had fully risen. But the gate was closed and no one was on watch.

As I stood there, wondering what to do, Nadia called out from behind, “Why have we stopped, sir?”

“There’s no harm in entering a village with no guard outside,” Lydia said. “We learned as much at the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Huh. I sure didn’t,” I said.

“The fencing is primarily for wild animals and monsters, not people,” Nadia explained.

“Shurule’s monsters are particularly weak, so not much is needed to keep them out,” added Lydia.

Apparently, adventurers could just come and go as they pleased in places like this. We hopped the fence and entered the village.

“First, we’ll greet the new mayor, then find out if they have any horses for sale,” I said. “If they don’t, we’ll have to rely on Forêt today.”

“Here’s hoping they have something for us,” said Nadia.

“And maybe some food,” Lydia grumbled.

As we proceeded to the mayor’s house, we heard the sounds of life coming from the dwellings we passed. A villager’s day seemed to start early.

We soon arrived.

“Hopefully they’re awake.”

“We’ll go ahead and inform them of our business,” Nadia offered.

“You wait here, sir,” said Lydia.

My misgivings about them falling so easily into the retainer role aside, the discussion would probably go smoother if I took the lead.

“You two have never met the people here, though. I mean, I’ve only spoken with them once before, but I can handle this,” I insisted.

The girls surrendered, so I stepped forward and knocked.

“Excuse me! Is the mayor in? Pardon us for coming so early.”

There was some bustle inside, and then the door creaked open.

“Who in the divines is knocking so damned ear— Mister Luciel!” The mayor beamed upon seeing my face. Unfortunately, I didn’t recognize him, but at least my first impression was decent.

“Good morning,” I greeted him. “Apologies for the early visit.”

“I-It’s no trouble, really. What brings you here?”

“We’re on our way from the Holy City to visit my master in Merratoni, and we’re two horses short. I was hoping we could strike a deal. Above market value, of course.”

“Bound for Merratoni, are you? Um, pardon the question, but I heard whisperings of rumors that you had been...divinely punished,” the mayor said timidly.

I had to admit, he was sharp. I didn’t feel like wasting time, though, so I decided a demonstration was in order.

“Don’t even get me started,” I groaned. “*Heal.*”

The mayor’s slumped right shoulder immediately returned to its natural position.

“My word!” he exclaimed, twisting his torso around. “The pain in my back! And my shoulder! It’s as if it was never there! Perhaps...”

“Rumors are only rumors. I won’t cause any trouble for your village.”

“Pardon? Oh, no, you’re our savior. I’m not the least bit worried about that. Please, come in.”

“Thank you.”

He awkwardly waved us through the door. Once inside, I took note of the fact that it was a lot messier than the last time we’d come.

“I do apologize for the mess,” he said, kicking books to the side and gesturing for us to sit.

“Don’t mind us. This wasn’t a planned visit,” I said. “You own quite a few books, I see.”

He shook his head. “They’re the former mayor’s. Almost every volume. I thought the Church might confiscate them, but here they remain. I’ve been picking through them one by one.”

Where had those things been when we’d gone through the place ourselves?

“Not a bad hobby. What are they about?”

“Some are handbooks regarding governing the village. Many are human supremacist manifestos originating from Blanche, the motherland of the movement. Others are stories and legends about Lord Reinstar.”

Surprisingly, nothing overtly out of the ordinary. Of course, he probably hadn’t read through every last one of them. Still, I hadn’t heard about human supremacy in a long time. My old nemesis... If its proponents were working behind the scenes in the Church, then the blame for everything would fall on the entire system of religion as a whole, and I didn’t want to think about the hell that would raise.

“I’m a bookworm myself. Usually, I find myself reading random things that catch my eye. Nothing here looks too out there.”

“There are records of old legends about the dragons, spirits, and labyrinths, if that piques your curiosity. Or if the more suspect texts have your interest, there are some strange ones regarding hero summoning and eternal youth.”

I seemed to have set the mayor off, because he suddenly looked extremely

proud of himself. What I wanted to know was why the Church hadn't confiscated those books about summoning and immortality.

"The Church *did* investigate this collection in its entirety, right?" I asked.

"I believe so. Much of it is dubious or originating from Blanche, and supposedly they're not entirely rare."

Okay, which regiment had been in charge of this place? Why would they not have collected books like that found in a house belonging to a man who had been transformed into a demon? Had they just not wanted to break their poor backs carrying it all or was there a more sinister reason?

I stopped myself. I couldn't confuse myself into making hasty conclusions.

"Those do sound interesting. I'll have to borrow them another day," I said. "About the horses...do you have any you'd be willing to part with?"

"No breeds of any particular worth, if that's a problem."

"Not at all. I know we're asking a lot. I'd like three for ten gold each. Sound reasonable?"

"Absolutely. I'll speak with our stablemaster immediately. Please wait here. It won't be long."

"Mind if I browse these books in the meantime?"

"By all means."

The mayor hurried out the door. Hopefully his cheer would translate into steeds soon enough.

"So, he mentioned Blanche a few times," I said to the sisters. "Anything stick out to either of you?"

"I certainly recall some of the elites supporting principles of human supremacy, and we studied the ways of living with privilege and duty. Many of the ideological aspects have become...less relevant to us since becoming adventurers," Nadia explained.

"I read many obscure titles regarding the spirits as a child, so very little was actually censored," Lydia said, "but I highly doubt you would find books like

these commonly.”

Human supremacy was certainly rampant in Blanche. But I remembered hearing that these two had left their home after their coming-of-age ceremonies at fifteen. Too young to be privy to much insider knowledge for sure. These books were still suspicious, though, so I’d have to investigate them later.

“Is human supremacy prevalent among the commoners?” I asked.

“I’ve heard it’s even worse with them,” Nadia replied. I remembered the persecuted half-beastpeople in Yenice and felt a pang in my chest.

“You said you read a lot, Lydia. Anything to do with hero summoning ever come up?”

“Oh, of course,” she said. “Blanche is where the very first hero was ever summoned, after all. Not even nobles know the precise details, though.”

“The claim that summoning was attempted is undisputed,” her sister added, “but reports conflict regarding whether anything was actually accomplished.”

“Many of the nobles maintain that Lord Reinstar’s many exploits overshadowed the glory brought by the first hero. So there is a portion of the population that doesn’t think too highly of him.”

Suddenly, I felt a strange sense of camaraderie with the man, the myth, the legend.

“Can you tell me anything about those people?” I pressed.

“Unfortunately not,” Lydia answered.

“We left home as soon as we were of age, and our family was never one with power to begin with,” said Nadia.

The event that had sparked their awakenings as the Spiritsworn and Drakesworn had been a forced marriage with an elite—a man already in possession of quite the harem. Lady Elinesse was the only other Blanche noble with any degree of authority I could think of. The Brain of Blanche would surely know a few things. Come to think of it, the whole reason she’d thrown herself into her research had been in protest over yet another forced marriage.

Blanche sounded like they had some issues to work out.

I returned my attention to the books and began scanning them for anything noteworthy. “Sorry to dredge up bad memories. Let’s start looking through these books.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

I went straight for the titles about summoning and eternal youth that the mayor had pointed out. Considering the whole demon incident from last time, my gut told me they’d be a good place to start. It was hard to believe it had already been over half a year since then, and then it occurred to me that, amidst all the chaos, I’d never heard any word about what had happened. Lord only knew when everything would settle down and I’d have my peaceful life...

I scanned through the summoning book. While battling the demons here, I’d severely weakened them with Sanctuary Circle, but in the process I had destroyed vital clues: a staff, a jar, and a miasmic magic circle. Assuming it had been a *summoning* circle, something within these books would hopefully reveal what the demons’ goal had been. Succeeding in that might lead to something about the mass amnesia cases Brod had mentioned.

As misfortune would have it, however, I came up empty. Sighing, I glanced at the piles of texts and spotted a bound and expensive-looking volume among the mess. I picked it up and took a peek inside. Its pages were exceptionally dirty, a stark contrast to the cover, and the ink was so aged that it was nearly impossible to decipher. Purifying the filth crossed my mind, but I stopped when I considered that the spell might purge the rest of the ink as well.

The book primarily discussed summoning and spacetime magic. The former was actually a sub-branch of the latter, and although conducting the art of summoning was a legendary feat, as long as an equivalent exchange was included in the ritual, even those without magical affinities could do it. If you were to summon a living being, for example, that would of course require the exchange of another living being. Not all payments needed to be made in lives, however. Mana would suffice as a substitute. Considering the children had been taken hostage during the prior incident, and the villagers brainwashed while miasma engulfed the entire village, it was logical to conclude that every human

in town would have been offered up as a sacrifice. So whatever they'd been trying to summon must have been monstrous.

I turned the page, and the discussion shifted to summoning via the use of magic items—including a section on jars and pots. There, I found a whole host of freaky concepts like “soul exchanging” and possession. From this, I learned that should the ritual be completed and a person's soul expunged, and should the summoned entity be demonic in nature, the sacrifice's body would be consumed. In other words, this meant that had we arrived at the village a second too late, the demons would have given birth to monstrosities.

“You have to be a special kind of insane to think this up,” I mumbled. On the next page, I discovered even more dangerous notes. “Yeah, I'm buying this from him.”

Upon closing the book, I heard a commotion coming from outside, so the three of us decided to step out to investigate, Nadia and Lydia carrying a couple of books regarding the dragons and spirits.

“I didn't get any bad vibes from the mayor, so something must have happened,” I said.

“Were we followed?” Nadia wondered.

“No, the Church would be a little more subtle. I'd say it's either monsters or someone's been hurt.”

“Then we need to hurry,” said Lydia.

“Someone could need our help,” her sister added.

Their urgency was surprising, but I had to agree. We left the house and followed the noise to where it was loudest.

“Has something happened?” I asked the mayor.

“Ah, Mister Luciel. Well, it's just that the villagers heard you had returned and they're adamant about expressing their gratitude.”

More and more people continued to gather, many beginning to cheer when they noticed us.

“I see. The rumors must have worried them. Since you're going to the trouble

of selling us your horses, why don't I take the opportunity to heal anyone who needs help?"

"You would do that?!" a random villager exclaimed, kneeling on the ground dramatically.

I smiled. "I've gotta clear my name, after all."

"Sir," the mayor interjected, rubbing his hands, "you should know our coffers are decidedly empty."

We hadn't even finished our deal with the horses yet and he was already dropping some crucial information. He wasn't a very good businessman.

"In that case, there are three books that caught my eye at your house. We don't have the time to sit around and read them right now, though, so how about you pay us with those?"

"Y-You can take as many books as you like! They're all but worthless to us with our humble lives, and their contents serve only to unsettle."

For some reason, it felt like the mayor's enthusiasm was more a product of the strangely cold looks from the villagers than his own magnanimity. Perhaps he wasn't especially well liked. On that note, were matters of employment and personnel the Executive Division's field as well? If so, I had to wonder if they were properly staffed. More things to look into in the future.

"Appreciated," I said. "If you'll prepare the horses, I'll see to the people."

"Right away!"

"Now, can someone point me in the right direction? Oh, before that."

I offered a hand to the kneeling villager, lifted him up, and cast Area High Heal to dispel any remaining doubts in everyone's minds regarding the rumors. But the response was a tad more enthusiastic than anticipated. The villagers immediately took a knee and seemingly began to worship me. Flustered, I urged them to stand up then had them take me to the houses of the people who hadn't gathered outside. Once everyone was nice and healed, the residents tried to pull me into a celebratory feast, but we were in a rush so I politely turned them down.

“How are those horses coming?” I asked the mayor.

“They’re all ready for you,” he replied. “We don’t have to hold a banquet, but won’t you eat with us before leaving?”

I sensed a ravenous aura emanating from Lydia, but I could just give her something light on the road.

“That’s very generous of you, but not this time. Maybe when we’re in the area again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You must be in a hurry, so we won’t keep you. Your steeds are this way.”

The mayor didn’t seem all that offended by me declining the offer. It had probably just been out of courtesy. He guided us to the stable, where I found three horses waiting for us. They appeared healthy at a glance.

“They’ll do perfectly,” I said, handing him a sack of thirty gold.

“Thank you ever so much. These three in particular are an energetic bunch, so they’ll carry you to Merratoni well.” He wore a wide grin, ecstatic from the sale. It had been an exceptionally profitable one.

“If anyone from the Church comes asking about me, feel free to tell them where I went.”

“Um, very well?”

“Also, here’s a little extra to make sure your people stay fed.”

“Oh, thank you kindly!”

The moment I pulled out more gold, there was already a hand out and waiting. The man had a nose for money, for better or worse.

I approached a horse to mount it before remembering that Forêt was still the only one to let me ride. Instead, I called out the carriage from my magic bag and decided we’d ride a ways out first. I didn’t want to have to go all the way across the horizon to be out of sight, though.

“You don’t need to see us off,” I insisted. “Too much for my nerves.”

“Very well. We will pray for a safe journey, sir and madams.”

“Much obliged.”

Nadia and Lydia mounted their horses as I took the driver’s seat of the carriage, and we set off. Once we were a good distance away, I called Forêt out and let the horses drawing the carriage inside. After cleansing her with my usual magic, I hopped onto her back, and at last all was as it should be.

“It’s been a while since I saw someone that excited about money,” I remarked.

“Coin did seem to be his weakness,” Nadia agreed.

“The villagers didn’t seem very fond of him. I wonder how he’ll manage,” said Lydia.

“Hard to say,” I answered. “But if he doesn’t learn, the people’ll rise up and pick someone new to lead them.” Forêt neighed impatiently, and I patted her neck. “Sorry, we’re going. Don’t go too fast, though. I don’t think the other two’ll keep up.”

Reluctantly, Forêt started to walk. The sisters tried to take the lead, but Forêt refused to allow any of the other horses in the front, so we proceeded at an equal pace.

06 — Long Time No See

We stayed on guard for any lurking threats, monsters or otherwise, but the trip was entirely uneventful. Seeing as we had quite a bit of free time on our hands, I told Nadia and Lydia about how the Lineage of the White Wolf was assisting the representatives in Yenice. Nadia immediately launched into nostalgic storytelling.

The White Wolf had apparently saved her life three years ago when she had been adventuring solo. Although still green, she'd had the attention of many newbie and mid-class parties due to her skill with a blade. But she had refused all of their invitations, uneasy about teaming up with strangers. A certain group of adventurers had taken offense to her attitude and plotted to disguise themselves as bandits and jump her. Just when things were starting to get dicey, in came the Lineage of the White Wolf, secretly tasked with defending her.

At first, having been raised in an environment of human supremacy, Nadia had doubted whether the beastmen were actually her allies. But the guild had given them the mission, and Sekiros's and Basura's wives were humans, so she had ultimately ended up apologizing for her rudeness. Through their kindness, Nadia had begun to doubt the things she'd been taught until finally humbling herself before the party in the hope that they would teach her to become a proper adventurer.

The wives in question had to have been Melina and Mernell. They'd been receptionists at the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild, as I recalled. If anyone could earn Nadia's trust the hard way, it was those two.

"I had hoped to study under them only after reuniting with Lydia, but the women were with children," Nadia concluded.

"They were pregnant?!" I exclaimed. "Well, good for them."

Did Brod know about that? Surely he did after speaking with Galba. The thought of my friends starting families really made the passage of time hit me hard.

As I ruminated, Forêt began to slow her pace. The horses seemed to be getting tired. I considered just healing them at first but then remembered we hadn't had breakfast yet.

"Let's stop here and take a break. We haven't eaten today, so you're all probably hungry."

I looked at Lydia, who nodded furiously and repeatedly. Smiling in amusement, I dismounted and started preparing some food, merely scooping some pot-au-feu and pasta we'd made in Neldahl onto a few plates. Breakfast ended without incident, and the horses were rested, so we set out again.

We passed several villages but stopped at none, and aside from a short lunch when the sun was at its highest, we didn't stop again for the rest of the trip. Just around dusk, we saw the city walls of Merratoni at last.

Forêt noticed that something was wrong first. She ceased galloping and started to nervously glance around.

"What's wrong, girl?" I asked.

I closed my eyes and focused my senses but felt no presences or strange mana. The other horses looked just as uneasy, though, and an abnormally large flock of birds suddenly took off in a hurry, as if fleeing something.

"An earthquake?" I wondered. "Or a monster stampede? Nadia, Lydia, stay on guard and keep your horses calm. We might have to make a run for it."

"Yes, sir," the sisters replied.

"Let's go, Forêt. Slowly." Just then, a violent noise reverberated through my ears. "What the heck was that? It sounds like it's getting closer."

"Is that a wyvern?" Nadia pointed. "It's massive."

"I don't sense any monsters," Lydia remarked.

True, but I wasn't about to rest easy until we knew what that thing was. Forêt Noire dashed towards Merratoni, but the winged beast was fast, and it caught up with us in no time—until it zipped right by.

My breath caught in my throat. "You're kidding me."

The flying entity gradually descended in spite of my disbelief. Noticing that my surprise wasn't out of fear, Forêt slowed to a stop.

"Aren't we making a run for it?" Nadia asked.

"No," I said simply. "My friends are on that."

"On' it?" Lydia asked. "You know that thing?"

"Well, it does have Luciel and Co.'s trademark emblem."

Eventually, the red, bird-shaped airship landed a short distance away from us.

"Didn't think they'd model it after the Spirit of Inferno. Almost looks like a phoenix," I mused.

The contraption was completely propellerless and seemingly powered by ejected mana. A door in the side opened up and Lionel came flying out with the others.

"My master!" he shouted, sprinting towards me, arms wide and eyes swimming with tears. "A thousand congratulations on your sagehood!"



I flinched out of sheer cringe at the display while Forêt completely removed us from the situation altogether. When I'd told them to hurry to Merratoni, I hadn't meant for them to literally fly there. Regardless, I was grateful for the haste.

I dismounted. "I'm glad you're doing well, Lionel. I appreciate you rushing all this way on such short notice."

"As your most trusted companion, it was only proper," he replied proudly. "But why do you pay me undue respect?"

I grinned at him. "I mean, I had to mess with you a little after...whatever that was you just did."

"Chief's found himself some claws," Ketty teased. "But the manners gross me out, so I say stow it."

"Slaves or not, we will always follow you, sir. Speak with us as normal," Kefin said.

The two of them had appeared behind me without me even noticing, and they seemed more keen on nitpicking than offering an actual greeting. Ketty, as usual, was the frank one while Kefin played the straight man. They looked just as excited as Lionel, though, despite their front.

"Thanks for coming," I said. "And for keeping Lionel protected. Oh! It's good to see you, Dhoran. Pola. Lycian. You three really outdid yourselves for this reunion. Just what I'd expect from the world's best craftsmen."

Among Dhoran's many submitted plans had been a blueprint for a flying machine, which I'd immediately greenlit. Thankfully, we had all the necessary materials on hand, but I still hadn't expected it to be done so quickly. I was speechless, really.

"Hey there, Luciel. The old girl took some blood 'n no small amount o' sweat, but with the Earth Dragon's ore and Luciel and Co.'s coffers, we made her real. I oughta be thankin' you for givin' me this once-in-a-lifetime sorta job."

My company's coffers? Say what? I hadn't done much of anything with it personally, so I was a little estranged from its financial affairs. I had Forence,

the Yenitian fox-man, under contract to work honestly, though, so he couldn't have been up to anything sketchy. Goldhus hadn't brought up any issues over arclink either. I was confident that everything was fine, but I made a mental note to get in touch with Jord and gather the particulars at some point.

Pola and Lycian finally scurried forward, holding their hands out expectantly.

"Hi, Luciel. My Magic Artificer skill went up to nine while building this with grandpa. Now I can make all sorts of automatic cooking things," Pola raved.

"I'm glad to see you, Mister Luciel," Lycian said. "Remember when you mentioned making a magic device to detect monsters? I've succeeded in building a prototype capable of sensing mana. Though it'll take me some time yet to refine it to focus on monsters alone."

"I appreciate the report, but, uh, what's with the hands?" I asked. "Let me guess. Magic stones?"

The two nodded firmly and shamelessly. What was I, the magic stone dispenser? Just pop out magic items and out come the gems? Because yeah, that was pretty spot on, actually. And I was just fine with that.

Never change, you two.

"I heard you have big ones," Pola murmured.

"Just imagine the kinds of magic items we could create with them!" Lycian exclaimed.

"What are you gonna do with them right this second?" I argued. "Put a pin in that for now. Did you finish the work on that arclink crystal?"

"We did that ages ago. And we made it smaller," Pola said.

"I believe you mean I made it smaller," Lycian corrected her.

"And I made it even smaller."

"All right, that's enough," I interjected. "Save it for once we're in the city and my master has his order. I'll keep those magic stones for myself if you aren't good."

That shut them up real fast. They really were living entirely in the moment, all

for themselves. In a good way. I was a little jealous of them.

“I take it you summoned us not merely to inform us that you’ve become a sage,” Lionel surmised.

It was actually Brod who wanted their help, not me.

“About that...”

“First, ya mind stashin’ the airship away in your bag?” Dhoran interrupted. “It’s not goin’ anywhere, and we’re headin’ to Merratoni there anyway, aren’t we?”

“Wait, it’s not going anywhere? As in, it can’t move?” I asked.

“Not without a load o’ mana to jump-start it again. It’s not easy to get ’er up and going at a moment’s notice.”

I’d been hoping to ride it at least a little, but oh well. Dhoran and the others deserved praise just for making the thing in the first place.

I approached the airship, but Lionel stepped in front of me. “Pardon me, sir.”

He touched the ship and it vanished.

“Gotten used to your magic bag?” I asked.

“Indeed. Seeing as Merratoni is only a stone’s throw away, shall we walk while we discuss my earlier question?”

“Good plan. I’ll explain on the way.”

We started moving slowly towards the city, exchanging relevant intel on the way.

“...so to summarize, I became a sage during my time in Neldahl. I never expected Substance X to be the key to it all. That was quite the shock.”

All this time, I’d cursed Monsieur Luck for dooming me to days of drinking the stuff, but now I found myself more grateful than ever.

“That is a shocking revelation.”

“To be fair, I still can’t use much aside from holy magic, so I’m pretty faulty as

far as sages go.”

Still, I was more than satisfied with that alone.

“So long as you have that, you’ve nothing to fear,” Lionel assured me. “I will bear all your blows and slay your enemies.”

“Is it just me or are you...different?”

He seemed a lot more fervent than before. In an oppressive way.

“You’re not wrong,” Ketty agreed. She didn’t do that at Lionel’s expense often. “Ever since Nalia got pregnant, he’s been throwing himself into training like a madman for the child’s sake, and yours. The medical district almost banned him, he was there getting patched up so often.”

“Pregnant? Nalia?!” I exclaimed. “You’re having a kid?!”

“My new youth may have cost me my skills and abilities, but I’ve vigor aplenty in other ways!” Lionel guffawed.

At least he was taking it in stride, I supposed, but did that mean he’d left Nalia there alone? I’d have to get the details from Ketty and figure out a way to make it up to the poor lucky lady.

“Well, congratulations. You’ll have to tell me the specifics later. Is life in Yenice easier than on our first visit?”

“It is the picture of peace. The school conducts interviews with retired, accomplished adventurers, and your company continues to contribute its profits to the good of the nation. Employment is high and happiness abounds.”

There was Luciel and Co. again. I was starting to look forward to our next visit, but also a little nervous at the same time. If Yenice was doing that well, it sounded like I should have been thinking about retiring there. Yet, for some reason, I sensed even more trouble waiting for me down that path.

“From what I hear, Luciel and Co. is making waves. It’s been out of my hands for a while, but I’m glad they’re doing good things. Anyway, back to the main topic, do you know anything about these rumors surrounding me?”

“The half-beastmen of the former slums quickly tracked down the one responsible for spreading those rumors in Yenice, and a truth serum concocted

by the Doctor's Guild has proved effective in the investigation."

Yenitians sure worked fast, and their methods reminded me of Galba's. With the Lineage of the White Wolf helping things along and the Healer's Guild being led by Jord, I could rest easy knowing the matter was in good hands.

"How did the citizens take it?" I asked.

"None believed a word. Should they have proven true and you really had lost your holy magic, it would not have changed the fact that your company has invested greatly into Yenice's infrastructure. Few would dare oppose you."

I looked at Ketty and Kefin. They nodded confidently.

"Good. That's a relief." I always had my hands full just keeping myself sane, but there were still people who accepted that about me—trusted me. And I had them to thank for everything. Monsieur Luck really was the best skill I could have asked for. "By the way, Goldhus told me you two have been sparring a lot. How much of your old strength do you think you've gotten back?"

"Against me or Kefin?" Ketty interjected. "I give him one-in-thirty odds of winning."

Lionel grimaced bitterly, but the fact that he had even a fraction of a chance against people whose levels well exceeded three hundred when he was only four-ish months out of having his stats reset was insane. Ketty flicked her tail with pride, but Kefin frowned.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Lionel is improving at an incredible speed," he replied. "He's shattered many a novice adventurer, humbled several veterans, and earned the vitriol of many high-rankers. The ill will has extended to even myself."

I looked at Lionel, who promptly averted his gaze. Kefin was his guard, so no doubt he'd endured his fair share of fearful looks.

"Um...thanks," I told him. "Your sacrifice is appreciated."

I felt oddly close to Kefin, as a fellow average Joe among freaks of nature. He would surely only continue to outdo himself.

"Adventurers lack the training quotas that soldiers have," Lionel remarked, his

excuse finally formulated. “None possessed the drive to push themselves to the very brink, and this disappointed me, to be true. Goldhus began to indulge me, of course, and together we reached new heights, but then the Healer’s Guild’s earlashings got longer with every visit...”

What Lionel had failed to realize was that he was the exception. His disappointment with the way adventurers trained was inevitable. And since he’d gone and given Jord and the guild trouble, I needed to make it up to *them* now too. Plus, I had a feeling something very similar was going on in Merratoni’s Adventurer’s Guild.

I turned towards Pola and Lycian, who were neck deep in a conversation about their inventions. Dhoran listened behind them with a grin on his face.

“What have you been up to these last eight months?” I asked him. “Just working on the airship?”

“Well, I started with everyone’s gear, but other than that, not much else,” he replied. “Time flew, I tell ya. Woulda liked to have installed some magic artillery on ’er, but it wasn’t in the stars.”

A gun of some kind would have certainly been useful for any potential flying monsters, albeit problematic for international law.

“I see where you’re coming from in a safety sense, but are you sure that idea isn’t fueled by personal fantasy?”

Dhoran beamed. “What man worth his stones don’t have a few fantasies? I’m thankful to ya for lettin’ me live out mine.”

I couldn’t very well say anything back to that. I was just plain embarrassed now.

“Anything new in Rockford?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Thought we’d have Illumasia knockin’ on our door, but all’s been quiet. When Grand and Trett caught wind o’ what we were buildin’, that lit a fire under their asses. Those two’re after your coin purse, they are.”

“I fear the things that duo might make with so much enthusiasm.”

“According to them, it’s our own fault for inspirin’ them too much.”

“Personally, I blame Rockford and its population of chronic sore losers.”

“You’re not wrong there!” Dhoran howled with laughter.

I could only hope that their passion would lead them to create something at least tangentially related to the creation of a peaceful world. Maybe a new series of angel’s pillows. That was what Trett should have been working on, in my opinion.

Our trivial conversations carried us all the way to the gate. When it just started to come into view, I stopped. Why? Well, the last time I had returned, the only place a welcome banner had been draped was the Healer’s Guild. This time, the *entire outer wall* was adorned with one that read, “Welcome to Merratoni, home of Luciel the Sage.”

“You know, it’s funny. Somehow, I hate this a lot more than the rumors,” I said flatly.

“Consider our situation one of emergency,” Lionel countered. “In that context, I think this would be quite effective in dispelling the rumors and replacing them with the truth. Though you might feel differently.”

“Maybe,” I groaned. “Let’s go with that. I swear, when we find the culprit, they’re going to feel a lot more than the awkwardness they’re subjecting me to.”

We approached the gate, where the guard bowed in greeting. Something about him was oddly cheerful.

“Excuse me, what’s the occasion?” I asked.

“You might have forgotten, sir, but I was on duty the day you first arrived in Merratoni,” the sentry answered.

I did remember him, actually. He was the first person in this world I had met, after all, and that spear had made quite the first impression.

“You’ve put on a little weight, if my memory serves,” I said.

“You remember!”

“To some extent. I don’t think I ever learned your name.”

“Oh, I’m but a lowly gate sentry! I’m honored beyond words that you simply recall my face, Sir Sage.”

“Thanks, I guess,” I said, laughing awkwardly. “I was hiding being a sage for so long, it’s gonna take some time to get used to that.”

I entered the city with a nervous smile. The main street was positively packed with pedestrians on evening errands and we quickly became the center of attention. Normally, this would be where my master showed up and led us to the Adventurer’s Guild, but he was nowhere to be seen.

This unsettled me. Uneasy, we quickly made our way to the guild ourselves.

Rushing through Merratoni’s streets, we found Brod at the entrance to the Adventurer’s Guild.

“M-Master? What happened to you?!”

“That Luciel I’m sensing? Wasn’t expecting you for a while. Or this many people.”

“Where did you get those wounds?!”

Both of Brod’s eyes had been sliced, his left arm had been severed from the elbow down, and he was missing more than half his left leg. He wasn’t responsive to my voice either, meaning his eardrums must have been ruptured as well. He looked about as bad as I would have after a day of training, but at least I still had my limbs when all was said and done. I cast Recover, Purification, and Extra Heal on him without hesitation, enveloping Brod in a pale light and restoring his body to normal. The audience fell into a stunned silence, but I ignored them.

“Welcome back, Luciel,” Brod grunted casually. “Glad there was a big-time sage around to save my ass.”

The dozens of questions I had vanished in the face of his confident smile. “It’s good to see you, Master. I’m back with some new tricks this time.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less of my apprentice.”



The warm welcome would have made me teary-eyed if not for the sudden cheer from those who had gathered around.

“Now you all know the rumors are a load o’ shit,” Brod shouted to them. “Luciel’s back as a sage, so it’s time to celebrate!” The cheer grew louder, this time mingling with applause. “Think you can do something to leave an impression, Luciel? Something to give the assholes who were after you a scare?”

“It’s too late for subtlety now, I guess, but why?”

“Don’t be a stick in the mud. We’re celebratin’. Well?”

Out of consideration for the work he’d done to resolve the rumors, and his good cheer, I swallowed my pride. “Will flying work?”

“Will *what* work?”

I ignored the incredulous outburst. “Be right back. *Be my wings and soar, Wind Dragon!*”

With that short chant, I kicked off the ground and took flight, rising about thirty meters. I darted here and there a few times before landing shortly after. The sunset on the way down was breathtaking and felt like a nice treat to end things with.

Everyone was simply stunned, mouths agape. First time seeing some random guy fly, I could only assume. Not one said a single word even after my feet were back on the ground.

“So, uh,” I mumbled, “was that not good enough?”

Before my master could respond, the biggest cheer so far rose from the crowd.

“You all saw that!” Brod shouted over the clamor, attempting to regain control. “If that wasn’t proof, I don’t know what is. Now it’s time to start spreadin’ the word that Merratoni raised a sage. Luciel, come on. Inside.”

Yet more applause broke out. I shyly offered a wave and a bow before entering the guildhall. Inside, everyone was frozen—not at the sight of me this time, but at Brod. Upon noticing me, they glanced between us a few times, then

roared with excitement.

“Brod’s back on his feet!”

“He really ain’t a healer anymore! He’s a *sage*!”

“The Whirlwind’s about to raise hell again.”

“Let’s get the hell outta here. To, uh, drink in their honor!”

“To the bar!”

The excitement over Brod’s recovery lasted only a moment, and it was immediately followed by an exodus of hurried adventurers.

“You know what’d make that liquor go down smoother?” Brod asked them. “Workin’ up a sweat first. And you can’t go out celebrating without the stars o’ the show, can you? C’mon, get over here and whoop my ass! Luciel’s here, so you know what that means!”

The adventurers paused at the door, the blood draining from their faces. One warrior with a shield held his stomach wearily and said, “I-I’m not feelin’ so good today. Damn! I bet I coulda learned a lot, but oh well!”

“Don’t worry. That’s what we got Luciel here for.”

The warrior hung his head, utterly defeated.

“I-I’ve got a thing to go to soon, so count me out this time!” the spear-wielding man stammered.

“I thought you were goin’ for drinks.” Brod sneered. “Show me a good time and you’ll get that plus a good meal.”

The man with the spear flinched, turning his fearful gaze to me in desperation. Actually, it wasn’t just him. A whole flock of adventurers were giving me the puppy-dog-eye treatment. I found this a less than comfortable position to be in, so I decided to throw them a bone just this once.

“At least let them off the hook after one round,” I said. “Also, we can get to business tomorrow, but we really should settle our lodging for the night.”

Brod grunted. “Fine.”

I looked at the adventurers. “Everyone okay with that?”

“Bah!” one spat. “I don’t know what the hell we were expecting from the Whirlwind’s apprentice.”

“Why’d any of you expect him *not* to be a battle-crazed lunatic?”

“Son of a... I totally forgot this guy slew a dragon when he was still a damn healer.”

“Who the hell thought goin’ to him for help was a smart idea?”

It seemed this crowd wasn’t familiar with my very first nickname. “Dragonslayer” wasn’t quite the aesthetic I was after, but at least it was one of the better ones. I was nodding to myself in satisfaction when I realized my mistake. The guildhall wasn’t entirely devoid of veterans who were more than well versed in that period of my history.

“You’re all a buncha idiots! Who doesn’t know about the healer who trained with the Whirlwind at *level one* for a whole year?!”

The man and his guffawing party nearby looked familiar. They were some of the people who’d given me clothes back in the day.

“You can’t mean...*him*? The zombie who wouldn’t stay down? The one who had the creepy smile on his face every time he got back up?”

“The very same. We’ve all heard of him. The guy who could take the Demon Instructor’s beatings and then down the Bear Chef’s Substance X all with a twisted grin. They called him...”

I could not allow this to happen. The words the adventurer was about to speak could not ever be uttered again.

“*Protect me, Holy Dragon! Carry me, Thunder Dragon!*” All sound was drained from the room. I grabbed the offending adventurer’s shoulder and he was summarily electrocuted, babbling and spasming. “No one repeats that name again,” I declared.

The guildhall was now free of ominous utterances. Once I released the dragons’ power, the adventurer collapsed. I didn’t want the guy to die, though, so I cast High Heal just to be safe. But I had let my guard down.

“Damn, that takes me back!” Brod howled. “The Demon Instructor and the

Masochist Zombie.”

The guildhall was no longer free of ominous utterances. And things only got worse.

“That’s him?” an adventurer murmured.

“I thought those were just legends,” muttered another.

“He’s really real.”

The buzz simply wouldn’t die.

“Why would you do this to me?” I pleaded with my master.

“Forget it,” Brod replied flippantly. “So you’ve only got holy magic, but that doesn’t make you a one-trick pony, does it? You’re lookin’ a helluva lot stronger for someone who was supposed to be hitting the books.” He wore a positively innocent grin on his face as he spoke.

“Well, it’s a long story.”

“Then tell it to me downstairs.”

I was firmly in my master’s crosshairs, and the other adventurers visibly relaxed in relief now that the heat was finally off them.

“Just hold on! I will not allow you to spar without me!” someone shouted. It was Lionel, and I wasn’t even surprised. And then there were two battle-crazed lunatics. Ketty and Kefin avoided my pleading gaze.

“I-Isn’t that the Lion of War? From Illumasia?”

The murmurings immediately resumed.

“Well met, Whirlwind,” Lionel said.

Brod cackled. “Almost forgot you were still here. Today’s a real party.”

“Hm. I’ve no interest in festivities unless blood is involved.”

“You asked for it. Let’s get goin’, Luciel. Today’s gonna be a good day.”

Galba and Gulgar were usually here to reign him in at times like this, but they were nowhere to be seen. Where did I let it all go wrong? I just wanted to see Nanaella and Monica, and yet I was powerless as Brod grabbed hold of my robe

and firmly pulled me down to the training hall.

07 — Some Things Never Change

Despite being all but forced into it, I did feel some fondness for the underground training hall. The adventurers should have run, but seemingly convinced they were out of the danger zone, most of them had followed us down to observe the matches to come. When we arrived, Gulgar and Galba finally showed their faces, though shock primarily occupied them once they saw that Brod's injuries had healed. Noticing me, however, they relaxed.

"It's good to see you, Luciel. For many reasons," Galba said. "Thank you for fixing Brod up."

"Our pal's got a way of showin' up right when we need him, huh?" remarked Gulgar. "I got some new dishes I wanna borrow your palate for later."

The two brothers greeted me with the same kindness as always. Now it really felt like I was back home at last.

I smiled bashfully. "I'm finally a sage now, guys. And Gulgar, you should probably be feeding Master, not me."

"He's barely hangin' in there drinking the stuff. Poor guy wouldn't be able to stomach solid food," Gulgar replied.

So he actually was drinking his Substance X. Funny. I recalled him making a big deal about never being able to keep the stuff down in the past, but whatever.

"But a growing boy needs to eat," I teased. "Just look at the miracles it worked for me!"

"Only reason you grew up strong is 'cause I gave you the foundation that you built on," Brod shot back. "Substance X ain't what did it. Don't even joke about that."

Okay, not fair. That was a low blow right to my heart. "Thanks. But to be fair, I did get a lot out of it."

"Well it'll be a cold day in hell before you catch me eatin' that shit, 'cause who the hell knows what it does when you cook it! I'd rather go on a—no, ten—no, a *hundred* suicide missions than have to chew that garbage!"

Spoken like a true battle-crazed lunatic. Then again, I never had checked to see whether the effects of consuming Substance X were the same even if eaten in a meal. That would have been handy to know right about now.

“Anyway,” Galba interjected, “as I’m sure you’re aware, Brod, there’s a mountain of work with your name on it. And you’ve got a brand new pair of limbs to do it with.”

“We went easy on ya since you were injured in bed for five days, but now that you’re back in one piece, you better get on it,” Gulgar urged. “Think of your position before you start givin’ yourself extra free time.”

“Lemme have just one go-around, won’t you? To celebrate good health and all that,” Brod argued.

The adventurers started creeping back towards the exit upon hearing themselves implied by the “go-around” reference. With so many crammed together, though, it was impossible to make a break for it without causing a scene. I knew they should have run when they’d had the chance.

Brod turned to the attempted escapees. “Leave and I’m upping the Substance X for all your asses.”

Everyone’s faces were petrified, as if they’d just been given a death sentence. By “upping,” it sounded like he’d been giving them the stuff already, and that was the biggest surprise of all. Not that it was that much of a big deal, but considering how just seven years ago I’d been the only one drinking it, it felt special to know that people were finally acknowledging the benefits.

“Guess there’s no harm in that. It’ll be over in no time anyway,” Gulgar said. “Dinner’s already started and I’m curious to see how far Luciel’s come.”

“We did handle the most urgent matters this afternoon, so I suppose we can spare some time,” Galba agreed.

And then the brothers pressed as one, “But when you’re done, you’re going back to work.”

Just like that, everyone had lost their final hope of salvation.

“You got it. It’ll be nice to go all out without worryin’ about beating someone

half to death since Luciel's here." Brod sneered. "Some good training to be had tonight."

The adventurers feared for their lives. I could feel it. Very soon after, the sparring matches began.

Brod began with the adventurers. The rest of us stood on the sidelines and predicted the results.

"Who do you think'll win?" I asked. "Based on skills and levels, I'd say the adventurers have the advantage, but I can't imagine he'll go down easy."

Lionel shook his head. "Perhaps he wouldn't if he were hunting monsters like I was in Yenice, but Shurule is blessed with few threats, so I predict his level is not as high as it otherwise would be. I place the odds at three to seven in the adventurers' favor."

"My bet's still on the Whirlwind," Ketty chimed in. "He's still working with his old experience, so he's probably improving leaps and bounds like you, Sir Lionel."

"I also think he'll win. He's not one to flaunt his ability," Kefin added.

I suddenly realized we were missing a few people. "Where are the sisters? And Dhoran and the girls, for that matter?"

"They asked some adventurers to show them to their lodgings," Kefin answered. "Nadia and Lydia said you seemed to be enjoying yourself, so they would find a place to stay. As for Dhoran and the girls, they simply have no interest in battle."

The sisters were being considerate of me and my reunion with everyone. Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian, meanwhile, were the same as always.

"Thanks," I replied. "Oh, they're starting."

The preparations had finished, and Brod was facing off against a party of six adventurers.

"Begin!" Galba cried.

The adventurers made the first move. A vanguard of four brought their

weapons down on Brod, notably without a shieldman. They had likely been hoping to overwhelm the opponent with numbers. My master first parried the strike of the agile swordsman before deftly redirecting the thrust of a spear. Spotting his opening, the axe-wielder swung his weapon at Brod's torso. My master didn't flinch, however, and deflected the blow off his shield with a quick sidestep, dampening the impact.

I'd seen this way of fighting before. He'd taught it to me. When facing multiple weaker opponents, it was best to minimize the damage while waiting for an opening. The longer you could keep that up, the sloppier and more frustrated your opponents would get. Even if you were to take a hit, you could use that to make them cocky and even the playing field. Of course, during my lessons, that last part came with the asterisk that I probably wouldn't be able to get away with it.

Brod was demonstrating this very tactic before my eyes. Something was wrong, though. His lightning fast speed, his silent and almost mockingly confident footwork, every one of his movements seemed to lack emotion.

The match continued. I could see every move my master made with perfect clarity, so his opponents likely could as well. Their teamwork was nearly flawless, effectively laying on the pressure and restricting his range of movement. Brod deflected another axe blow while the second swordsman thrust forward, but Brod kicked off the axe-wielder and retreated. This wasn't the first time he'd pulled the maneuver off, however, and a dagger came flying right where he landed along with a Fireball spell. The fact that they had magic users capable enough to throw out spells in such a crowded place spoke to their talent.

Brod blocked the dagger but failed to do the same with the fireball—or so I thought. I'd spoken too soon and nearly missed him hurling his shield at the spell, triggering it in midair. The party then used the smokescreen from the small explosion to charge their opponent all at once again, and Brod exploited this oversight for all it was worth. Everyone was looking at him, so he dashed towards the enemies in the back, blade flashing, and blood was flying an instant later. Amidst the confusion, Brod used the momentum to evade any haphazard attacks the vanguard might have thought to throw his way before swiftly

striking them down.

Clearly, he'd forgotten how to go easy. Everyone's wounds were deep and very much life-threatening, so I wasted no time casting High Heal on all of the fallen. The four in the vanguard dropped their weapons.

"Match decided! The winner is Brod!" Galba announced.

The guildmaster raised his sword up. He still wasn't anywhere near his old strength, but the fact that he'd more than held his own against a party of six was a good reminder that he was, in fact, still my master.

"How in the world was he so accurate while moving so fast? He didn't slow down once," I mused.

"It is a testament to the fact that the Whirlwind's intuition is no worse for the wear, even if his physical abilities are." Lionel chuckled. "This nearly has me excited. Let us go, sir."

Lionel's attention was far more directed towards Brod than me at this point. Pandora's Box had been opened.

"How's that, Luciel?" Brod asked with a smug grin. "The basics can take you far. I may not be my old self, but I can hold out against even B-rank parties these days."

I didn't even know his opponents had been B-rank. I thought they would have been a little stronger, but that perception was more down to Brod than their actual capabilities. I was happy for the guy, but something needed to be said.

"Master, if you can't bother to hold back, the least you can do is remember your sense," I said. "You can't go crushing the spirit of a whole party of B-ranks by yourself."

Brod huffed. "Tell it to the wusses who act like big shit just 'cause they got a higher letter in the alphabet than some other guy. I'm always telling people to remember their basics, but they get off track easy if I don't crack the whip a little. A bit o' tough love's better than them outright dying in the field."

"Sure, you've made your point." I smiled wryly as I cast Middle Heal on him. "That looked like a normal sparring match to me, though. What's got everyone

so scared of you?”

I felt a dozen sharp gazes at my back telling me to keep my mouth shut. Too late.

“Wish I knew. Anyway, it’s time for the main course. I’ve been looking forward to this, Lion.”

“No more draws,” Lionel declared. “Today, you lose, Whirlwind.”

“In your dreams. You’ve got another thing coming if you think a higher level’s gonna give you an edge against me. I’ll show you what a *real* edge feels like.”

Fire cracked and lightning sparked between the two, much to the relief of the exhausted adventurers as they retreated to the edges of the hall.

I turned to Galba after watching the crowd disperse. “Make sure they don’t kill each other.”

“Will do,” he replied. “All right, we don’t have all day, you two. Take your positions.”

At last, the rematch between Whirlwind and Lion had begun.

08 — Smoke without Fire

Lionel and Brod faced each other, armed with their favorite weapons from my magic bag. They waited for Galba's signal with fierce smiles.

"Begin!"

But when it finally came, they just stood there. Neither dared to move. Brod's style was speed, disorienting his opponent with sheer agility, while Lionel's was defense and waiting for the perfect moment to defeat his opponent in one strike. At least, that had been the case when they were at their best. Brod had no idea how strong Lionel was now, and Lionel was anticipating Brod hiding a technique he hadn't shown off in prior matches. Sweat dripped from their brows as a silent battle raged between them. Silence dominated the hall.

Just as I was wondering who would be the one to break the deadlock, Brod simply dropped his stance. Grinning savagely, he started casually walking towards his opponent. Lionel, not fooled by his demeanor, squatted even lower and tightened his grip on his shield. And after an uncomfortably long moment of inaction, Brod's sword and shield were suddenly swapped for daggers that he then hurled straight at Lionel's legs and head. Lionel, however, only advanced forward, not even bothering to move his shield into the path of the oncoming blades.

I prepared to cast healing magic at a moment's notice as they drew dangerously close, until Lionel's shield suddenly shimmered, expanded, and deflected the daggers at the last moment. My master didn't even blink. Swapping his weapons for two shortswords in either hand, he dashed at his opponent. Lionel imbued his greatsword with mana, enveloped it in flames, and swung it towards Brod. He didn't even attempt to dodge it. The tongues of fire consumed him.

"Extra Hea—"

A second before I could finish a panicked cast, Brod's form vanished like a mirage and blood was spraying from Lionel's legs. My master then reappeared behind the general, but the blades of his dual swords were missing. He dropped

to one knee.

“What just happened? Ketty, did you see? Kefin?”

Neither of them looked like they understood what they’d just witnessed. “I don’t have a clue,” Ketty admitted. “The moment I thought he was done for, he popped back up.”

“It could have been some form of ninjutsu, but I’m not positive,” Kefin said.

The first time Kefin and I met, when he had attacked me at the Yenice Adventurer’s Guild, he’d used a similar sort of body switch technique. But ninjutsu had to do with redirecting a target’s conscious focus, and such abilities required the use of illusions. I should have been able to follow what had just transpired, and yet I was as in the dark as everyone else. Brod had done nothing special, to my knowledge, and based on their expressions it seemed like we weren’t the only ones who were confused.

“Guess you’d have to be on the receiving end,” I mused, returning my gaze to the two combatants. “How did Lionel see through it?”

It didn’t look like the match would be going anywhere anytime soon. Brod seemed to have injured his arm when he’d lost his blades and couldn’t attack properly. Lionel’s wounded legs prevented him from properly standing, and not even he could go on the offensive.

“Draw!” Galba finally announced.

The two looked less than satisfied, to say the least, but reluctantly concluded the match.

“Good fight, you guys,” I said, casting healing magic on them. Their expressions were practically polar opposites.

“Well, that was the best we had,” Brod rumbled.

“I allowed myself to grow prideful. Never did I anticipate you having learned such a technique,” Lionel lamented.

“Master, how did you move like that?” I asked. “You moved like water against the adventurers, but what you just did was on an entirely different level.”

Brod snickered. “What, that? That was just a combo of Ambulation and

Physical Enhancement. Well, there's a bit of a trick to it, but keep practicing and anyone could pull it off."

He said that last part loud enough for everyone to hear, likely as a push to get people to keep training. I never would have imagined that leveling up two skills like that could lead to such a use. My gut told me my master wasn't telling us everything, though.

"You've still got tricks up your sleeve even without your crazy speed," I said.

"I'm not sure how it appeared from the outside, sir, but to me, my vision seemed to waver," Lionel said. "I believe our senses might have been altered for a single instant."

That sounded plausible, but nearly everyone in the room had witnessed the same thing, and that couldn't be an easy thing to fake. Once the two of them were fully healed, I got too curious to hold myself back.

"That should do it for the healing," I said. "Master, are you saying even I could do that same maneuver?"

"Depends on how hard you train," he replied. "All right, you're up next. Considering the level gap, I'd say two-on-one should even things out."

"Pardon?" I must have been hearing things.

"That sounds fair given Mister Luciel's current abilities," Lionel agreed.

And now it was starting to sink in. I stared at the two standing before me. Regardless of how low their levels had fallen, I still wasn't confident I'd be able to beat *one* of these lunatics, much less both at once. I'd sold myself too hard with the dragons' powers and now my grave was as good as dug.

"Okay, for the record, the stuff I showed you is a last resort," I said. "It costs a ton of mana, so I can't use it whenever I want. In other words, you two would kill me."

Both of my oppressors shook their heads soberly.

"This is more for us than it is for you," Brod said.

"Please accept our challenge," Lionel implored.

“For you?” I repeated. “How is beating me up supposed to be ‘for you’?”

“That’s not what this is about! Luciel, your talent isn’t something you were born with. It’s your dedication,” Brod pressed. “You’re strong because you studied, learned, and practiced. Stronger than either of us right now, I’m willing to bet.”

“Did you hit your head, Master? You think a former healer stands a chance against not one but *two* people strong enough to take on a B-rank adventuring party?!”

“You’re damn right I do. If you moved as fast as I saw you earlier, we’d be dead as doornails. But even without that power, you’re still strong.”

“I was prepared to deem you such four months ago, sir. Long before you obtained these abilities,” Lionel added.

These people were giving me way too much credit, but fine. No amount of whining had ever gotten me out of a fight in the past anyway. Might as well go all in.

“At least let me use Area Barrier,” I said.

“Everything’s fair game. Just don’t get cocky,” growled Brod.

“No holding back. A severed limb or two never hurt anyone,” Lionel japed.

All I felt from their bloodthirsty grins was impending doom.

“Fine.” I surrendered. “Please just don’t kill me.”

“We’ll see.”

“Expect no quarter from us.”

I really needed my master to give me a guarantee there. But all I could do in the face of their fiery spirit was nod. I summoned the Illusion Sword and Holy Dragon spear from my magic bag, put some distance between us, and prayed for my life.

And then came Galba’s voice.

“Begin!”

09 — Pride

I wouldn't have the luxury of hesitation in this fight. Brod held a longsword and buckler, and Lionel stood by him with his greatsword and large shield. They both had magic bags, though, and could swap on a whim. I had to stay on my toes. My one chance of victory was the fact that the two would be trying to compete over who could snag the win, so there likely wouldn't be much coordination. Of course, if one managed to create an opening, the other wouldn't hesitate to exploit it, but I decided not to think about that possibility.

"Begin!"

The moment Galba's voice entered my ears, I cast Area Barrier and leaped backwards. Brod's blade cut through the air right where my neck had been an instant earlier. A second too late and my head would have been arcing through the air. But when I regained my bearings, I saw that Brod hadn't actually moved an inch since the match began. It had been a hallucination induced entirely by an aura of sheer pressure and intimidation. A stern reminder that my master was not to be underestimated.

A chill suddenly ran down my spine. I jumped to the side, and a giant fireball zoomed right past me. It collided with the training hall wall, the explosion engulfing some of the spectators.

"If you've time to concern yourself with others, you must be rather confident," Lionel taunted. "This isn't over yet."

"Sorry, but give me a moment," I said. I cast Area High Heal through a long range magic circle on the victims of the fireball. "Everyone who's watching, do so at your own risk."

Lionel hadn't even used that thing against Brod. Granted, probably because it would have been dodged, but I didn't think he'd pull it out against me. My master and his mysterious new ability were already trouble enough without someone hurling fire at me from across the room.

I took a deep breath and reassessed the situation. I had accepted this match prepared for it to end in my resounding defeat. So what did I have to lose?

Overthinking every move only dulled my senses, so why not just pull out all the stops and do what I could?

I exhaled as Physical Enhancement ran through my body. Lowering my stance, I kicked off the ground towards Lionel. I closed the distance in an instant and swung the Illusion Sword. Lionel met the blow with his shield, but I ignored the lump of steel standing between us and brought my blade down harder. Metal rang out as the two collided, my blade slicing through half of the shield's surface area.

Brod appeared from my blind spot, ready to capitalize on the opening, just like I knew he would. He wouldn't miss his chance, so instead of meeting it head-on, I simply leaped in the direction of the slash in an attempt to minimize damage. This wasn't going to feel good. Just then, though, somewhere deep inside my mind, something was telling me I was better than that.

"Water Dragon, shield me behind a frozen barricade!"

I used Lionel's shield as a step stool and launched myself back. The moment I escaped, there was a clang of metal followed by an odd bubbling and hissing. The metal had been Brod's blade colliding with the ice wall. He made it almost half a meter before his whole arm was frozen over. The odd hissing had been Lionel's flame sword hitting that very wall and causing it to boil.

It had come to me in a flash of inspiration—the same defense technique used by the Water Dragon during our training—and it went about as well as it could have. I opened my stat screen to double check my remaining mana. I had enough for only one more use of the dragons' power.

"You can 'only use holy magic' my ass!" Brod jeered. "You can do all sorts o' shit!"

"Such is the power of a sage. You wield not only flight, but the ability to construct a wall powerful enough to stop our attacks," Lionel mused.

They both grinned, and together they said, "This should be fun."

They fixed me with gazes like predators eyeing their prey.

"You guys are sorta scaring me. Can we not?"

“Enough. Let’s pick this back up,” they said in unison.

There were no thoughts, only combat inside those heads. Lionel tossed aside his shield, revealing his blood-soaked arm. The attack that had cleaved through his shield had apparently reached his flesh. He needed medical attention. Brod’s arm was still in the ice wall, but with effort he managed to tear free. What came out wasn’t pretty, but neither of them looked remotely ready to call it quits.

Exasperated, I looked at Galba. It was in vain, though, because I only got a tired smile and a shake of his head. Medical attention would have to wait. The match was still on. No doubt Brod wouldn’t let it end regardless. I really should have known better than anyone, but not even death was a cure for one’s inherent nature.

Glancing back at my opponents, it was obvious from their conditions that I’d gained the upper hand. Stalling would’ve been the surest path to victory, but I didn’t want to pull a cheap tactic like that during a sparring match with my master. No, I was gonna make this swift. I was gonna go for the knockout win.

“I’m going all out,” I said. *“Protect me, Holy Dragon! Carry me, Thunder Dragon!”*

Every single sound became drawn out, stretching into infinity, before finally going silent. I leaped forward, starting with Lionel. His flame sword was held out at me, so I hopped to the side and delivered a kick to his gut. Feeling the blow land, I turned my attention to Brod, but just then a chill ran down my spine. I was low on mana, though. I had to go for the kill now or never.

And that was my downfall. Rule number one: never get cocky, no matter how much of an upper hand you have. I learned that lesson well in this very hall—the hard way. With a cold floor at my back and an unforgiving ceiling before my eyes. Clearly, I still had a lot to learn. And so my vision narrowed.

For all the power the dragons had given me, it was still new, and I couldn’t wield it properly yet. I had ignored that glaring weakness of mine, instead relying on the immense physical advantage it gave me. But without the skill and experience to use it properly, I was predictable. Even so, I told myself no one could touch me, and somewhere deep down I was probably frustrated that the

two strongest people I knew had become so weak.

I shot myself straight at my master with a flying kick, and I felt an impact, but not that of the kick landing. By the time I sensed his presence fading, it was too late.

“Too...easy!” he growled with effort.

Falling backwards, he grabbed my leg with his injured arm and pivoted to lessen the force of the kick. Then, his free arm gripped my chest, and he used my own momentum to mercilessly slam my spine onto the hard floor.

The pain threatened to rob me of my consciousness. Amid my fading awareness, I thought I heard the pained gasp of my master, but everything went dark before I could be sure. The next thing I knew, I was feeling the familiar, cold splash of water in my face, and my eyes shot open.

I groaned. Everything hurt. I cast Extra Heal without hesitation, but where had all that pain come from? I glanced around once my eyes had adjusted to the light to find Lionel and Brod on the floor, faces pale.

“Good, you’re awake! Sorry, but these guys really need healin’.”

Gulgar was standing over me with a bucket and a frantic expression. My brain finally creaked to life.

“Yeah. Right. I can do that.”

Lionel’s injuries seemed to be limited to just his arm, but the bleeding was extensive and the floor was stained by a puddle of red. Meanwhile, thanks to Brod’s reckless struggle against the wall of ice, his arms were pretty banged up, with a few bones bending in ways they were never meant to. His back was scorched as well. I cast Extra Heal on them both, only to be hit by a wave of nausea. Checking my stat screen, I was right on the doorstep of magical exhaustion. I hadn’t been out very long, then.

As I watched the two of them being restored, frustration at my defeat finally swelled inside me. I had the advantage in level *and* the dragons’ power, and I’d barely even put up a fight. Brod had always told me stats and levels were irrelevant, but now I really felt it.

“You two lost a lot of blood, so just to be safe, you need to be sure to eat well and get some rest. At least for today,” I told them.

Brod snickered. “Hurts to lose, huh?”

“Perhaps you don’t dislike combat as much as you say, sir, if that display was somehow unsatisfactory to you,” Lionel said.

“You think so too? We might as well make this a habit, then,” said Brod. “Could get us back into shape, and Luciel can learn how to control those powers of his.”

Yeah, I was a bit sore about losing, but not *that* sore, okay? At least, I didn’t think I was.

“No, no, no!” I shouted. “I refuse to be lumped in with either of you fighting fanatics!”

“You sure? Guess you must not care to hear why you lost, then.” Brod couldn’t just read my mind like that. It wasn’t fair.

“All I want to know is why my kick felt so weightless and how you were able to keep up with me moving faster than the human eye should be able to track. That’s all.”

“Oh yeah? First of all, what you kicked was an afterimage. I knew you’d be coming for me, so I hid my presence. Can’t you do that?”

“No. I never learned how.”

“Hm. Well, it’s sort of like a stealth skill, and it lets you dilute your presence. The best can make it look like they’re not even there at all.”

“But it can’t actually make you disappear or leave afterimages, can it?”

“Anyone looking hard enough’ll probably be able to sniff you out unless your skill’s high enough, yeah.”

“I realized as much in my match with you,” Lionel said. “And still you had me.”

Lionel talked like this all made perfect sense. Me, on the other hand...well, it was clear that we were all on different planes of existence as far as combat sense went. I’d lost this match the moment I’d failed to take that into account.

And here I had thought I was going to “make this swift.” Oh, it had been swift all right.

“There’s one other thing I want to know,” I said. “How did you keep up with me?”

“I didn’t exactly. Just sorta set you up to throw out an attack I could anticipate.”

Well, that was embarrassing. I had done the equivalent of winding up a nice wide right hook against a pro boxer. Anyone would have been able to dodge it.

“So I made you think you hit the illusion version of me,” he continued, “and that’s why you hardly felt a thing. The confusion made you predictable, so I just timed it and tossed your ass.”

“How were you able to react so quickly?”

“Using Physical Enhancement to just about the limit. Almost knocked me out, using pretty much all my mana at once, but that’s what it took to even us out. It was a bit of a gamble on my part.”

My master explained all of this with a smile. Still, I had a strong feeling there were plenty of people out there who would be able to replicate what he had done. I had to take this lesson to heart sooner rather than later.

“So basically, I dug my own grave,” I said.

“Well, you’re not used to movin’ like that yet. And I’m still a long ways off from my peak, so you’re just about perfect for a sparring partner.”

“Indeed, we might not have stood a chance were we not prepared,” Lionel added, rubbing his stomach.

I had definitely landed the kick against him, at least. But he couldn’t move as fast as Brod, so him taking the blow had probably been calculated to give my master a better shot at me. The fact that his wounds had been comparatively light spoke to that.

Most surprising to me was that they had actually worked together to form an offensive and defensive role between themselves. To them, though, it probably wasn’t anything special. Just the bare minimum necessary to stand a chance

against me. In other words, I still wasn't worth anything more than that. We were leagues apart in every sense. Cutting through Catherine's sword had instilled a sense of pride in me, but looking back, that had only worked because no one had been expecting it.

It was frustrating. I wanted to win so badly, but the match was over. All that was left to do was hold that welcome banquet for my return.

10 — An Inside Job

After the match, we moved to the mess hall, where we ate, drank, and had an all-round good time. Before the festivities, Ketty and Kefin went to fetch Dhoran and the others who had gone to arrange for lodgings, and all throughout, I received fervent requests to continue distracting Brod, as well as offers to spar (on condition that I heal everyone afterwards). Of course, our resident Substance X researcher, Gulgar, didn't waste the opportunity to throw out the idea that the loser would have to try one of his homemade "recipes." Meanwhile, as was apparently tradition, discussion about yet another nickname for myself began, but Galba and Brod called for me before I could listen in.

Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, Lydia, Nadia, and I relocated to the guildmaster's office, where there was a large table with a map spread across it. For whatever reason, the place was splattered with blood, which I cleaned with Purification after a quick complaint.

"Sorry to drag you away from the fun," Brod said.

"I already got to eat, so it's no problem," I answered.

"Then I'll get right to it. Ever since Galba caught wind of the rumors about you, we've been doing everything we can to figure out the truth. I'll let him explain the rest."

"In the interest of time, I'll keep this to the facts," Galba began.

"Please do," I said.

"Rumors that you'd received divine retribution began to spread ten days after you left Merratoni, by my measure."

"Seems awfully fast."

"Exactly. And they originated from Grandol."

"Grandol? But how?" I hadn't expected Church HQ to be the source of it all, but Grandol at least had been low on my list of possibilities.

"Surprised?" Galba asked. "Remember back in Yenice when you had those

criminals turned into slaves?”

“Yeah?” I replied. That didn’t exactly narrow things down, but the most well-mannered of them were working for me now, and the conditions for their freedom were lenient. It was likely most of them had been freed already. The particularly remorseless criminals had been sent to...Grandol.

“Seems like a noble in Blanche bought a bunch of them up. Someone who probably didn’t take too kindly to you working your way up the ladder in Yenice so quickly, and he wanted dirt.”

I looked down at the table. “Blanche?”

“He already had feelers out in Grandol for different reasons, but then word spread that you were in the neighborhood.”

Different reasons, huh? I didn’t like where this was going. I glanced at the sisters—they wore stern expressions. One of the reincarnated, Vlad, came to mind.

“This noble...he was after the sisters, I assume.”

“That’s right,” Galba confirmed. “Earl Blade von Kamiya is his name.”

I could sense the girls’ tension rising.

“So what did he do? Order the slaves to spy on me?” I asked.

“So I’m led to believe. But I struggle to imagine any beastman capable of avoiding Brod’s scouting ability, meaning you had to have only been watched while in town. Not in any labyrinths.”

“I see. But what did we do that tipped them off? Surely there was nothing strange about us going back to Shurule.”

And it couldn’t have been all that suspicious for a group of adventurers to hole up at the inn after running through an entire labyrinth. Us quietly returning to Shurule surely wasn’t grounds for nasty rumors.

“Not on its own, no,” replied Galba. “But you’re more than a little well-known for your holy magic, and your going to Neldahl without casting a single spell after sneaking out of Grandol lended itself to doubt.”

“So they spread the rumors while keeping me under surveillance at HQ.”

“That’s my best guess based on the information we have. On a semirelated note, how familiar are you with your peers in the Church and their nationalities?”

Galba’s “best guess” tended to be a reliable one. He didn’t often make conjectures without some degree of certainty.

“Only the people I’m closest with,” I said. “I could figure out where the others are from once I’m back, though.”

“That will have to do. Another thing, are you aware of Blanche’s role in the human supremacist movement?”

“I only learned about it just recently. Nadia and Lydia told me about it.”

“Good to know. Back to the original topic, don’t you find it odd that our enemy somehow knew that you hadn’t used holy magic even *after* returning to the Church?”

“Well, I didn’t until just now.”

“And the Church is home to no few human supremacists, isn’t it? People in positions of power, no less.”

Dongahar immediately came to mind—the man with a laugh as dumb as his name.

“Are you implying there could be a human supremacist funneling intel to foreign agents?”

“I have a few eyes and ears in the Church myself, after all. You ruined someone’s favorite sword the day you returned, as a matter of fact.”

That had to be Catherine, but I’d never taken her for an informant. Especially not when it came to Church secrets. But had he said “favorite” sword? I didn’t know it had been that important, and now I felt a little guilty.

“I had no idea Catherine was the kind of person to leak info on the Church.”

“She’s bound by a contract, so those secrets are safe. She is a great source of information on *individuals*, though. In the worst-case scenario, I can always

hand a job out to the Adventurer's Guild."

Sounded like he had his ways. But this just made me more confused. What had I ever done to harm the reputation of those in power within the Church?

"When did you two start sharing intel?" I asked.

"Ever since she became Captain of the Knights, though we really hit it off when Brod asked me to make sure you got along at HQ when you left."

"Hey, you didn't have to mention that last part!" Brod barked.

"Well we didn't need him jumping at shadows."

I had no idea just how much I'd been watched from behind the scenes.
"Thank you, guys."

Galba smiled, but Brod only pouted.

"Let's get back on topic," said Galba. "In short, the rumors were an attempt by Blanche nobles to destabilize the Church of Saint Shurule. Anyone else who profited off them are just corrupt healers and those with a grudge against you, piggybacking off the opportunity. Unfortunately, the Church's response only added to their credence, and that's as far as my research has led me."

"Summary appreciated. The one saving grace here is that the Church itself didn't orchestrate any of this."

Galba's smile vanished. "They're anything but blameless. My investigation turned up plenty to do with them."

"You mean the Executive Division?"

"Precisely. My agent's been doing all she can to root out the evil at its source, but the swamp is much deeper than we anticipated. It doesn't help that the executives are on to her, or that she's forced to answer to them."

"I know the knights are controlled by them, but Catherine? How do they control someone who could take them all one-handed?"

"The more you have to protect, the easier you are to manipulate. The executives have a former templar captain and active-duty knights. Her hands are tied."

Catherine's weakness was more than likely the pope. But contracts should have prevented anyone from doing her any harm unless there was some kind of loophole. As for the former templar captain, there was only one man I knew who fit the bill.

I shook the idea from my head. "We can believe in Catherine. There's no one Her Holiness trusts more."

"I hope you're right, but taking on systematic corruption isn't an easy task. Especially when our opponents are in the habit of detaining or even assassinating their dissidents based on falsified reports. To them, nothing is more important than profit."

From the Executive Division's point of view, I probably looked like an investment gone wrong.

"Didn't you say you captured someone who was spreading rumors about me?" I asked.

"You won't find him. Not in the land of the living," Brod answered. He closed his eyes, remembering. "Galba was ahead of the curve, and he kept tabs on everyone who was goin' around spreading the rumors to keep things from getting out of hand. And then the culprits showed up right on our doorstep."

"And you interrogated them about who they were working for, right?"

"Gave 'em Substance X, woke 'em up, then gave 'em some more. They broke fast."

I would have expected something a little more sadistic from Brod and Gulgar, but that didn't sound so bad.

"The stuff is a little hard to handle if you're not used to it," I remarked.

"We combined the intel they gave us with everything Galba figured out," Brod continued, "and we learned something...which I'll get to later. The rumor-spreaders turned out to just be plainclothes humans who got paid to gossip."

However much they'd been offered, it definitely hadn't been worth it. I did sympathize with them, though.

"Someone had to have been the employer, then. I assume you found them?"

“The moment we got ‘em to talk, I had Galba look into it. The trail led to Blanche bigwigs.”

“Makes sense, I suppose. Spreading the rumors as broadly as possible would maximize the damage. Maybe their goal isn’t the Church, but Shurule as a nation,” I mused.

“Can’t say,” Brod replied. “Our ‘guests’ cooperated, though, and they didn’t seem to want any trouble, so we let them go.”

We called that a “plea bargain” where I came from.

“Understandable. Executing people for gossiping would be a whole different problem.”

“Everyone’s guilty of that crime. All we wanted was to ask a few crackpots some questions about their theories.”

It was just like him to call an interrogation “asking a few questions.”

“So then why aren’t they with us anymore?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “I go out to train with some adventurers about once or twice a week...”

Galba interrupted his thought with a glare. “Can you believe him? At least he finishes his desk work first, but what kind of guildmaster tosses all the most crucial tasks to his chef? And this is partly your fault, Luciel.”

Gee, I wonder if Brod had a problem with neglecting responsibilities for the sake of training.

“Keep it to yourself, Galba!” Brod snapped. “Anyway, a few days ago, I was training in the forest near the mine just by the border to Grandol—same one that was missing before—when suddenly I heard shouting, swords clanging. One of the newbies with us was ambushed. Bandits, mercenaries, not sure what they were.”

“And the humans who were spreading rumors here were with them, weren’t they?”

“Yeah. Letting your guard down around types like that means you’re either about to lose your head or you just bought yourself a one-way ticket to slavery.

So I did what had to be done.”

If that had been just a few days ago, then had they been the ones to give Brod those wounds? Surely a ragtag band of cutthroats wasn’t strong enough to take *him* on. Still, as much as I would’ve liked to believe that, the fact was, someone *had* given him those injuries. Someone out there was stronger than Brod, and they’d clearly spared him.

“Does that mean you got all those injuries from a plain old group of bandits?”

“Like hell I did. Plain old bandits don’t turn into demons. Didn’t have much choice in which limbs I lost at the time.”

“They turned into *what?!* ” I shouted. My jaw dropped, and I looked down at the map again. To the east of Merratoni was a mine, and to the south of that was a forest that stretched into Blanche, a country known for its summoning rituals. And wasn’t Blanche the only other country besides Illumasia requesting Shurule’s aid against demons?

The feeling I had was most distinctly of the very bad variety. Were they trying to weaken the knights by throwing the paladins against demons?

“Honestly, they weren’t up to snuff with a real demon, but it was enough to keep me from getting into a flow. They kept throwing themselves at me, and then one self-destructed. And that’s how I wound up like that.”

Wait, they were all on him? “What about the other adventurers?”

“They got their asses kicked pretty bad, but they pulled through with teamwork and numbers. Not without a few scars, but no one got hurt bad enough to call for an early retirement or, gods forbid, an early grave.”

My master spoke with pride. I, however, was conflicted. One wrong move and he could have been gone forever this time—a thought I didn’t want to entertain.

“I’m the only one who made it out lookin’ like hell,” he continued. “The others threw every potion we had on me and carried me all the way back here, and it’s thanks to them I was still breathin’ when we made it. But then I got put under house arrest.”

“I’m just amazed you made it back alive.”

“What, you think I’d throw away the life you gave me that easy?”

I wanted to berate him for being reckless, but these were extenuating circumstances. Going off on him would have been for my own satisfaction.

I took a deep breath. “Assuming those humans were genuinely human, that means there really is a way to turn people into demons. Did you notice anything else? Anything noteworthy?”

“Nothing physically. I just sensed a crazy surge of mana, miasma came exploding out of their bodies, and an instant later they were transformed.”

We had fought with demons of a similar variety in the past, but Illumasia had been my number one suspect at the time. Back in Neldahl, Lord Wisdom had even mentioned experiments they were conducting to fuse people with magic stones, demonizing them. But the enemies Brod and I had fought hadn’t already been demons. They’d *transformed*. Before our eyes. What’s more, there had been no traces of the empire at the village. Only Blanche. If my hunch was right, then Blanche was far more of a threat than Illumasia.

“Anything else?” I asked. “Any magic stones? Tools? Did they consume anything?”

“Not sure how relevant this is, but remember that slaver we fought in Grandol?”

“Of course.”

It would be a bit hard to forget someone else who’d been reincarnated.

“The first time we faced off, he tried to use magic stones to summon something, right?”

“Right. He manifested a giant, red magic circle.”

“I didn’t see any circles, but I saw that same red light,” Brod said. “The miasma covered it up pretty quick, but I’m almost sure.”

And what had Vlad’s home country been? Blanche. Those guys were looking like public enemy number one right about now.

“Maybe it’s not Illumasia that’s creating demons. Maybe it’s *Blanche*,” I said.

“Don’t lose your head just yet. Galba’s on it.”

“They’re human supremacists, and anyone with authority is as tight-lipped as they come, so it’s been slow going,” Galba said.

“Even for you?” I asked.

“Yes, some information is beyond even my reach. But it’s not just demon sightings that have been reported. There have been cases of mass amnesia, so I’m focusing my efforts on that avenue.”

“Really?!”

“Not only in Blanche either. Even people in Illumasia have been awfully forgetful lately.”

“Illumasia...” I turned to Lionel and the others. They nodded in approval, so I continued. “You know about the Lion of War who’s supposedly still in the empire, right?” I asked Galba. I was referring to the fake who had forced a magic stone into Lord Wisdom’s body.

“I do,” he replied. “His name is Cloud. He’s a spellsword with talent in various fields of magic. He was an adventurer with the guild in the past, it seems.”

“You already know his identity?”

“Only his name and a few details, granted. He was neither a swordsman nor spellcaster when he was with the guild, but clearly he’s improved since then. He learned transformation magic in Grandol before suddenly disappearing.”

Why did I have the feeling this guy had been reincarnated?

“I guess he went to Illumasia and made a name for himself?” I wondered.

“Not quite. I wouldn’t call him famous, and he went to Blanche first, where he got in some trouble with the law. He fled to Luburk after that and joined the war effort as a mercenary, then he turned himself into Illumasia’s Lion of War. And that takes us to today.”

“I think you know more than a few details, Galba.”

How many adventurers had he already thoroughly investigated? Just how

many *connections* did he have? I was too scared to ask.

“I’m open to apprenticeships if you’re interested,” he said.

“How many times I gotta tell you he’s *my* apprentice,” Brod growled. “Keep talking, wise guy.”

“As you wish. At any rate, Illumasia is certainly experimenting with demonification, so they’re both deserving of caution. They could even be working together behind the scenes.”

“Blanche and Illumasia...working together...” I mused.

My own encounters with bouts of amnesia had been with the Spirit of Dusk, Lihzalea and her latent powers of darkness, and the incident in the village with the demons attempting to sacrifice people for some kind of ritual. If Lihzalea was behind the memory loss in Illumasia, that would have made Blanche responsible for the demonifications, but the reverse was equally plausible.

I’d completely forgotten about her ever since her disappearance. She herself had been a victim of the empire’s research.

“To summarize,” Galba said, “Blanche is our prime suspect regarding the demons and your rumors. But every country has its factions, and the radicals have been butting heads with the moderates in Blanche much more frequently as of late.”

“I thought just spreading the truth that I’ve become a sage now would be enough to set things straight, but it sounds like this is a little more complicated,” I said.

“You’ve been around the Church. You know how messy organizations are,” Brod remarked. “When word spreads that you’re a sage, you’ll be back in business as the Church’s poster boy, but other countries’ll see that as a threat. They’ll wanna see you gone. And they won’t do it directly. Maybe they’ll raise a fuss with demons and bide their time till they find the chance to assassinate you.”

“That’s why you told me to think about how I wanted to handle this,” I said.

If we could fish out the spy from the Executive Division, we could make the

Church right again. On the other hand, a spy was a fairly decent alternative to more outward acts of aggression.

“We’ve got our own theories, but the Church is locked up tight for us. Can’t say one way or another how things work there.”

“I’ll think on it. At the very least, I need to talk with these executives directly,” I said.

“Then that’s what you should do. We’ll be around to help. Now, that’s enough strategy talk. Got a place to stay tonight?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Your room’s just the way you left it,” Brod said tantalizingly.

“You kept it open for me? I guess I’ll take you up on that.”

“It’s yours. All right, anyone who cares about the party can go on. Anyone who doesn’t, go to your rooms. I don’t care which.”

And so the meeting was adjourned. My mind was filled to bursting from the information overload. What I needed was a nice, thoughtless sleep.

“Why is it so hard to just have a normal, peaceful life?” I muttered, sighing. My words fell away amid the loud chattering of the party.

I slunk off to my room. But moments before plopping onto the bed with my angel’s pillow, a knock came at the door.

“Master? Coming!” I called out.

I opened the door, and waiting on the other side were Monica and Nanaella.

“Good evening, Luciel,” they both greeted me at once.

“Oh, uh, hi. I figured you two must have been off today.”

They exchanged looks and grinned at each other.

“I was, because I heard you’d be coming tomorrow,” Nanaella said.

“And I’m working the night shift,” said Monica. “We promised we’d come see you together when you arrived.”

My master must have been exercising some tact right about now. Seeing the

two of them brought up old memories and put a smile on my face.

“Thanks for coming,” I said. “We didn’t get a chance to talk much last time.”

“People were saying so many things about you, but even if they were true, we believed you’d get past whatever it was you were working through,” said Nanaella.

“We were still worried, of course,” Monica added. “But hardly anyone in town believed any of it.”

Both of them knew that Brod’s renewed youth had something to do with me, so something told me that there was a little more implied beyond just what they were saying.

“What do you think would’ve happened if I really had lost my holy magic?” I asked.

“I’d say you’d have had your eyes set on being an S-rank adventurer next,” Nanaella replied.

“Or you’d try your hand at inventing different kinds of medicines with the Doctor’s Guild,” Monica answered.

“But still...”

“You want to know what we *really* think?”

“You wouldn’t have given up,” they said together.

I could tell that they genuinely believed in me, and not only from their words. I could see it in their eyes. It just about brought tears to my own.

“I’m really glad I have you guys,” I said. “So, did you hear about Brod’s injuries?”

We spent the entire evening chatting the night away.

11 — Goals and Foundations

I slept like a baby. Whether that was because I hadn't slept the night before, I was back in my cozy Adventurer's Guild room, or thanks to the angel's pillow was anyone's guess. I even found myself doing my old magic control practice routine when I woke up. Back in the day, I had done this every morning while working on my holy magic. It had been a struggle making sure I honed the skills I'd need to survive in a harsh world like this, but looking back, my memories of those days were fond.

I had conquered a labyrinth in the Holy City completely by accident. I had created new guidelines and restrictions on healing so as to make pricing fair and to make healers respected again. After leaving for Yenice, I'd rebuilt a guild, and just when I thought I'd get some peace, had ended up rebuilding the entire country along with it. I'd founded a school, an underground agriculture industry, and an entire company in my name. It was easy to call all I had accomplished the product of mere good fortune, but the fact was that I'd done it all out of a willful aspiration for some kind of goal, and those actions had earned me the ire of complete strangers along the way. For all the enemies I made, though, I gained friends and allies. I didn't regret anything I had done—on the contrary, I was glad that this was the world I had been reincarnated in.

Seven years. It was surreal to think that I'd really been here that long already. Seven years ago, I never could have imagined that I'd one day come face-to-face with dragons, spirits, and even gods. The question now was simple: what was my next move?

It had been about half a year since my return from Yenice, and during my first homecoming to the Holy City people hadn't exactly been friendly towards me (on account of their jealousy of my relationship with the Valkyries), but it hadn't seemed like anyone had been out to get me. Regardless of how little I'd used my magic after leaving Grandol, it was odd that everyone would suddenly believe such rumors about me. It could only mean that during my time in Neldahl, the executives had either obtained detailed intel or they had decided that I was more trouble than I was worth. Would I have been convicted then

and there had I returned without my powers after all?

I racked my brain for some time more, but I just couldn't rationalize the sudden shift in opinion. We needed more information. All we knew for certain was that Blanche, the empire, and the Executive Division all had objectives in mind, and I was standing in the way of them.

"It's too early for this," I murmured.

I needed to work this off in the training hall, then stuff it down with some of Gulgar's breakfast. Wrapping up my routine, I opened the door, and waiting for me outside was Brod. In full gear.

"Good morning," I said awkwardly. "You're up early."

"And you're up late. Let's get started."

"I'm sorry?"

Brod grinned viciously, and the next words that came out of his mouth didn't even surprise me. "Morning training, just like old times. Don't worry, the blades are dull."

"Right now? Also, since when do we use dulled blades?"

"I'm not a fan of the smell of blood in the morning. And I can't exactly hold back like I used to."

As long as he didn't chop anyone's head off before I could heal them, we'd be fine.

"I guess I could go for a morning workout."

"You've been stuck in your head since yesterday, and you won't find any good ideas in there without some relaxing exercise."

"That's an oxymoron if I've ever heard one."

"Hey, I just finished my paperwork. Be a good apprentice and show your master a good time, eh?"

He probably hadn't even slept yet. The power Galba and Gulgar wielded over him was intimidating.

"Fine," I said, following him into the training hall. "I was just thinking of going

back to the basics and doing some jogging anyway.”

“We’re gonna fight without Physical Enhancement today. See where our skill’s really at.”

I would have the advantage in stats, but I knew well how little that would matter at the end of the day.

“I’m beating you today, for the record.”

“You can try,” Brod jeered, tossing me a sword and shield.

Strapping on all my gear, I took my stance and waited. It all felt so nostalgic.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said.

Brod came at me with no tricks this time. But that wasn’t to say his strikes were weak or uncontrolled by any means.

“I’ve lived my whole life as a fighter, Luciel,” he said as we sparred. “I didn’t know how else to talk about this.”

Okay, now things were getting weird.

“T-Talk about what?” I asked.

“What’re you living for right now?”

“What am I... What do you mean?”

“You’ve always been at your best when working towards something, your relationship with the Church aside. It’s how you became a sage.”

“Well...it’s always been to live quietly and die of old age, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

I hadn’t had much time to really consider anything else beyond that. The realization was almost humorous to me.

“It’s easy to miss the forest for the trees when you take every day as it comes,” Brod said. “Adaptability’s a virtue, sure, but what about who you’ll be years from now? Ever given it any thought?”

“You mean like a long-term goal?”

In my past life, I had considered where I’d be in five or ten years rather

thoroughly. In this world, though, things weren't that simple. The immediate future was one thing, but it was hard to imagine what I wanted to do with my life as a whole.

"Yeah. Like how I'm not ever lettin' you get one over me!"

My master's sword became a blur, suddenly bent around my shield, and struck my side.

"Ow!"

Brod cackled. "You're not alone in the world, you know. Walk your own path, and do it knowing you've got me and everyone else in Merratoni at your back." He turned around and went up the stairs.

"Maybe once the aching goes away," I groaned.

But maybe he was right. Maybe I did need to find a larger purpose for myself. Whenever we found this supposed human supremacist spy in the Church, I was gonna get the motive out of them if it was the last thing I did. And then it would be nice if I got to hole up in Yenice afterwards, but if the demon problem wasn't addressed, it'd quickly become *my* problem. I'd have to get Lionel and Brod to train me in Grandol's labyrinths again until I could hold my own against them, if things really came down to it.

For now, though, my only goal was eating a delicious breakfast, regrouping with the others, and figuring out a plan of action. I hurried up the stairs after my master.

The mess was really quite clean despite the party last night. I couldn't help but notice the odd odor lingering in the air, though.

Gulgar spotted me and immediately pleaded, "Luciel! Do something about this smell, will ya? Can't hardly breathe in here!"

"Good morning to you too," I said. "Can do."

The stench was gone after a cast of Purification, and it was soon replaced by the enticing aroma of breakfast.

"That magic of yours sure is handy," Gulgar said as he removed his nose plugs.

“It’s always nice havin’ you around.”

“Want me to teach you?” I offered.

“I’m a beastman. You know I’m not cut out for spell slingin’.”

“Good point. You’d need to get your Holy Magic skill up to level six.”

“Can’t say the thought’s an unappealin’ one, though.”

There were quite a few beastfolk capable of casting spells, but most tended to have small mana pools. If you hadn’t been practicing since childhood, chances were you’d be banging your head against a brick wall trying to make anything of it.

“It’d really be something to see a beastperson excel at magic,” I said.

“You teach it at that school in Yenice?”

“Good question. I left the curriculum up to their head mistress, Nalia. I know some of our first students had a knack for it, though, so they’re probably working it into lessons.”

“Give ’em a good education.”

“That’s the plan.”

I had to remember to ask Lionel and the others how things were going there. I’d been telling myself that a lot lately, so I took out a notebook and jotted down a to-do list for once.

Gulgar got a good laugh out of that. “I’ll have breakfast out in just a bit. Take a seat.”

“Thanks. By the way, Master came up before me. Have you seen him?”

“If I were to wager a guess, I’d say he’s gone off to nap after givin’ you a good wallop,” Gulgar said, grinning.

I knew Brod hadn’t gotten any sleep. The exhaustion must have caught up with him once he de-stressed. Always busy, that guy. I really respected how he never let the weight of his responsibilities show.

I sat down at the counter across from Gulgar while he lined up dish after dish. It was quickly turning into a banquet.

“No doubt you’re gonna be in the thick of it today, so I don’t care if you’re a sage or not. Man’s gotta eat.”

“Oh yeah, I did get a lot of adventurers asking to spar with me.”

I never liked fighting other people, but I also didn’t like losing. Not that I *wanted* to fight. I just wasn’t gonna lie there and take it.

“Bunch o’ idiots, I say, if they think you’ll be an easy win,” said Gulgar. “The newbies got another thing comin’.”

“Is that what they’re saying? So they just wanted an easy way out of fighting my master, huh? You’re right. I’d better eat. Master’ll never let me hear the end of it if I lose to them.”

“I was hopin’ you’d say that.” Gulgar clunked a new dish onto the counter while I tasted the salad.

“Ah. That’s what the nose plugs were for,” I said.

“Sweaty men I can handle, but Substance X? I’ll never learn to live with that smell.”

“Stubborn, huh?”

“A man lives how he wants to.”

The two of us shared a chuckle. He and Brod were taking things day by day, just doing whatever struck their fancy. Meanwhile, I hardly even had a single hobby. I was a little jealous.

“I wish I could find my own ways to deal with stress. Like you and Master.”

“Everyone’s got their strengths and weaknesses. It’s about forgettin’ all that and just doin’ something you like,” Gulgar said. He paced towards the kitchen again. “But hey, I don’t see nothin’ wrong with you throwin’ around your magic and trainin’ like usual.”

“I don’t do those things for fun,” I murmured.

Everyone seemed to think that I got my kicks out of constant training, and it bummed me out. Regardless, I scarfed down the food in the empty mess hall and then rid the world of the evil that was Gulgar’s newest Substance X recipe.

Lionel and the rest showed up right around then.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning, everyone. And I’m sorry for yesterday.” I bowed deeply.

“Sir, please raise your head,” Lionel insisted.

“Listen, I’m extremely grateful that you all came when I called for you. I meant to talk with you all more, to hear about what you did and what happened after we parted ways, but it all got swept away by everything. And I think that’s why my master adjourned the meeting so quickly. I should have made time for you after that, but I didn’t. I just wanted to apologize for being inconsiderate.”

“We all had much to deliberate on after yesterday, sir. There’s no need.”

Everyone else nodded in agreement, so I dropped the subject and switched to a less dramatic one.

“Is anyone hungry?” I asked.

“We ate at the inn,” Lionel replied.

“Oh, okay. I’ve been thinking about everything, and I’m not sure I can reach a conclusion on my own. I wanted to ask you all for your opinions, if that’s okay.”

Lionel tilted his head. “Our opinions, sir?”

He seemed confused, but surely they all had thoughts to share.

“I want to hear everyone’s ideas for what we should do from now on,” I said. “You’re not slaves anymore, and it would make me happy to hear your honest thoughts.”

Pola stepped forward and raised her hand.

“Hm? Something to add?” I asked.

“You said you’d give us magic stones yesterday.”

Her subtly aggravated expression hit me right in the heart with adorableness. She was probably mad that I’d broken my promise. At least, I assumed she was. She was always so deadpan.

“Sorry. It totally slipped my mind. Do you have a magic bag? I can hand it all over now if you want.”

“Fine.”

Pola seemed to accept my apology. But then she suddenly put her arms around me.

“Pola?”

“You look tired. Thank you for the magic stones.”

I had no idea even *she* had been worried about me. I gently stroked her hair.



“I should be thanking you,” I said.

“The magic satchel is in Lionel’s magic bag.”

“Got it. Lionel, can you get that? I think someone needs some magic stones.”

“Certainly. I believe Dhoran and Lycian will be expecting a share as well,” he replied.

“Right.”

Lionel took out several magic satchels and placed them on a nearby table. Lycian scurried up next to Pola in anticipation.

“All right, just take up everything I pull out,” I said.

I began piling magic stones on a second table. I was wondering where Dhoran was when I saw him sitting in a corner with the look of death on his face. I quickly cast Purification and Recover on him. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been hungover.

“By the divines, thank ya for that,” he said, scratching his head awkwardly. “Felt like my head was about ta pop.” He then got right to helping the girls with the gems.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve said this before, but try and keep the merry-making to a healthy minimum, yeah?”

“There’s no dwarf in all the land who can ignore a pint undrunk. And with you around, there’s nothin’ ta fear but the mornin’ after!” Dhoran guffawed loudly.

We were kind of on the verge of an international incident, but at least Gulgar and Dhoran were finding amusement in toying with me. It did make me smile, though. Frivolous things like this were what friendship was about.

“By the way,” I said, “what’s the plan for you three?”

“We’re crafters, and that means we go wherever we need to ta be number one at what we do,” Dhoran replied. “Rockford, Yenice, anywhere that may be. So it’s a good thing we got such a great employer behind us, eh?” As roundabout as his way of cheering me up was, it still got me good. “I heard ya got these in Grandol?”

“That’s right.”

“So many. Such quality. I want to live in Grandol,” Pola said.

“For once, I agree. Rockford lacks a steady supply of monsters with gems, and those that do appear are always in the blasted sky,” Lycian griped. “And while Yenice has no shortage of magic stones, they’re always from orcs or ogres. Never anything of quality.”

“Staying with Luciel would be easiest, though.”

All those two cared about was their research and the overhead needed to conduct said research. I envied their passion sometimes.

“Do you need anything?” I asked Dhoran.

“Just good quality ore for weapons an’ armor, but my hands are full with the airship,” he said. “Don’t mind me.”

Right, ore. Rockford or the Kingdom of Dwarves nearby would have been a good spot for that. The airship would make that a quick trip, though.

“Good work on that, by the way,” I said. “Oh, on that note, I heard you visited a magic item shop in the Holy City. The owner of that place is a crafter like Pola and Lycian, and I was thinking about inviting her to Luciel and Co., but what do you guys think?”

Plus, she seemed like one of the less life-threatening reincarnated folk, and her unique ideas from Earth would be a boon to the girls.

“Not just anyone has the talent,” Pola said.

“Indeed,” Lycian agreed. “I didn’t believe anyone could match my intellect until I met Pola. And...everyone in Rockford.”

Was that a no?

“She’s made some amazing things, you know? I thought having that kind of creativity on our side might help you two with your inventions,” I said.

Pola nodded. “She was very creative.”

“And rather inspired,” Lycian concurred.

Rina had apparently earned the approval of the two most stubborn minds in

the world.

“I could use an assistant,” they said at once.

I’d spoken too soon. She knew how to run a shop, meaning she wasn’t just a skilled crafter. She had business sense. Many of her items were likely made with time constraints and on a budget, with less than ideal magic stones. Now, what if she were given the resources to make something incredible?

A new rival for the dynamic duo was in the works. “I’ll invite her, then.”

Pola and Lycian nodded, finished collecting the magic stones, then promptly retreated to the back again. Not a single thought occupied their heads aside from inventing.

“We’ll be stickin’ with you for a while,” Dhoran said. “Got that magic artillery to work out for the airship.”

“I don’t know how to steer the thing, so you’re more than welcome,” I replied.

Dhoran fell to the back as well. Luciel and Co.’s research and development squad was really outdoing themselves.

“All right. Nadia, Lydia, I want to hear what you have to say next,” I said.

But nothing could have prepared me for what they would share.

12 — Leaving Nothing Unsaid

Nadia and Lydia wore stern expressions. After exchanging nods, Nadia began to speak first.

“We’re heavily considering returning to Blanche for some time.”

“That’s, uh, rather sudden,” I said.

“We apologize for that, but if Lord Kamiya is the source of your troubles, then we bear some of the responsibility.”

Yesterday’s talk seemed to have really stuck with them.

“What do you hope to do? Negotiate? Question him about his role in all of this? Force him to give up on you? Don’t tell me you plan to demand they stop their demon research.”

In actuality, all they probably wanted to do was get out of everyone’s hair.

“When we became adventurers, we swore we would have nothing to do with Blanche ever again,” Nadia said. “And yet, this dabbling in the demonic arts could bring the entire nation to ruin. We have to do *something*.”

Lydia nodded resolutely.

“I understand. So, do you have a plan? Or any contacts to get in touch with?” I asked.

Given that they had essentially disowned themselves, I couldn’t imagine they’d have any reasonable means of even getting near the nobility anymore.

“No,” Nadia replied quietly. “But we’re prepared to do whatever it takes.”

This was completely reckless, and I could sense Nadia’s uncertainty from her trembling voice. I wanted to tell them to trust me more, but then I thought of a better way to convince them to back down.

“It’s extremely likely that Blanche is guilty of experimenting with demonification, and you thought I’d be okay with you two going somewhere that dangerous by yourselves?”

“It’s our fault that you’re in danger, sir,” Nadia argued.

“Last night, Galba and my master said that I was being targeted because of what I did in Yenice, right? Calm down and think logically. Why wouldn’t you wait until you’re stronger with the blessings of the dragons and spirits?”

“I don’t know what causes your impatience,” Lionel interjected, “but Mister Luciel is correct. We first need information. Recall that both Blanche and the empire are under suspicion, and it’s entirely likely that one is trying to paint the other as the culprit. In such a case, you risk causing needless international conflict. That is to say nothing of the fact that our enemies are likely more than well aware of your alliance with our leader by now. Surely you understand the implications this places upon your actions.”

If my admonishment hadn’t been enough, Lionel’s definitely was.

“You’re right,” the sisters replied dejectedly.

Hopefully we were all levelheaded again. I was curious about how threatening this Lord Kamiya figure was, though, for Nadia and Lydia to be so wary. Before now, I had been hesitating over whether to prioritize Illumasia or Blanche, but I couldn’t very well take the sisters back to their home as they were now.

“I’ll ask Galba to keep up his investigation of Blanche,” I said. “From now on, I’d like everyone to consult each other before letting your emotions get the better of you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nadia and Lydia replied.

They had been there for me in Neldahl just as much as I’d been there for them in the past. I wished they would lean on others more often, though being so used to only having each other might have made that difficult.

“Anyway,” I said, “Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, what are your thoughts on what we do from here?”

“We are Illumasians no more,” Lionel responded. “However, there is one individual who yet binds me there.”

“That Cloud guy. The one impersonating you.”

“Yes. I thought myself betrayed by my brothers in arms, abandoned by the

emperor to whom I swore loyalty in my youth, and I wallowed in that despair for some time. Now I know there is a creditor to whom I can repay this debt.”

“As long as you don’t rejoin the military,” I added.

Lionel laughed. “I’ve no intention whatsoever of doing so. My journeys with you have been far more fruitful, and I’ve a child to return to in Yenice now.”

His good humor assured me of his honesty. “There’s actually something I misplaced the blame about regarding the empire too.”

“What might that be?”

“I’ve been thinking since last night, and the possibility hit me that Illumasia might not even care about me at all. I’ve considered multiple measures to take on the chance that we encounter them at some point, but we never have. Not even once.”

The others looked confused.

“Uh, Chief? We ran into them in Yenice and the Kingdom of Dwarves,” Ketty said.

“Not directly, granted,” added Kefin, “but the empire is most assuredly aware of your existence.”

Maybe so, but they were a little off. “We’re acquainted, that’s for sure. Remember, though, I’m the one who lit the fuse.”

“Lit the what now?” Ketty asked.

“In simpler terms, please,” Kefin requested.

Everyone’s eager eyes rested on me.

“The empire was trying to use Yenice and the Kingdom of Dwarves behind the scenes, but I only kicked them out by accident. I never even planned on visiting the kingdom, but to anyone else it would look almost deliberate.”

They hadn’t anticipated my moves and schemed against me specifically. I’d only interfered with plans that had already been in place.

“You mean to say Illumasia has no particular interest in you,” Lionel confirmed.

“That’s my theory. You’d think they would have done *something* to get back at me by now if they really cared.”

In Yenice, they had planted a slaver to act as an agent, sowing chaos through Shahza the tiger-man. In the Kingdom of Dwarves, they had appealed to the prince’s darkest desires and used him to raise an army of ants in an attempt to topple the nation. But both of these had already been in progress by the time of my arrival.

“That’s a good point,” said Ketty.

“True, there don’t seem to be any plans in place to target you, to my knowledge,” Kefin said.

Seemed like I was getting my point across. It wouldn’t have surprised me if they did hate me now, though, after all their plots I’d unwittingly foiled. But Lionel didn’t look so convinced.

“Something on your mind?” I asked.

“Just one,” he replied slowly.

“Just one?”

“Do you recall where we first encountered demons?”

“It was a village between Merratoni and the Holy City, wasn’t it?”

“No. It was the Kingdom of Dwarves.”

“Wait, you’re right! The prince!” I exclaimed.

“Precisely. He spoke of obtaining power through ingestion of a magic stone. Doubtless the slaver he conspired with is to blame.”

Come to think of it, that *was* the first time I’d witnessed someone transform into a demon. The other ones had just left so much more of an impression.

“Did they have anything to do with Illumasia?”

“That, I’m almost certain of,” Lionel said.

“Do you think you could hold your own against a demon as you are now?”

He flashed his teeth in a predatory smile. “With your defensive and healing

magic, I believe so.”

“You might not remember him,” I said, changing the subject, “but I actually met a former Luburk noble in Neldahl who was with the same slaver as you back in Yenice.”

“He’s still alive?”

“He almost died in Illumasia, but he managed to make it out. According to him, the empire was conducting human experiments, embedding magic stones into living flesh. I’m guessing it must have to do with demonification, but what stuck out to me was that it’s apparently being led by your imposter.”

“Magic stones? In living beings? That’s utterly deranged.”

“He—Maxim von Wisdom, that is—is a Burkan baron, apparently. And his body emitted miasma, believe it or not.”

“I’m inclined to doubt anyone could live in such a state. Did he have any pertinent information?”

“He did. It seems Illumasia is conducting this research to *defend* itself against demons. Lord Wisdom was a failure, but the dwarf prince must have been from a successful batch. If you can call whatever he was a ‘success.’”

Lionel fixed me with a confounded gaze. “Do you think it would be feasible to reverse the effects with your powers?”

Everyone else stared at me expectantly, but... No. Maybe it was possible. For those early in the process, at least.

“Maybe. But it’s just as possible that if I tried purifying someone who’s been demonized, it would destroy them entirely rather than heal them. I suppose it could be feasible if they’d only been fused with a stone, though.”

“Then we must apprehend a demonized individual and test that for ourselves.”

“Yeah, if one happens to fall into our lap.”

We’d have the best luck heading for the source of the experiments, all things considered, but there was still business I had to attend to in the Holy City.

“Time allowing, we should continue our training,” Lionel requested. “I must return to strength for those I wish to protect.”

“Agreed,” said Ketty. “We haven’t gotten our claws in anything with much bite since the Labyrinth of Wiles. It’s not gonna be pretty if we have another run-in like we had at the village.”

“I second that assessment,” Kefin concurred.

Lionel aside, those two were on a whole different level (literally) from then, so I didn’t think we’d be at *that* much of a disadvantage. If it was training they wanted, though, the Labyrinth of Wiles would be the most efficient option, and we were running too blind to do anything about Blanche or Illumasia at present. Spending time preparing in Grandol would be smart. I needed to settle things with the Executive Division in the capital first, of course.

Just before I reached a decision, Galba rushed inside.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Whatever it is, I’m guessing it’s not good.”

“You could say that,” he replied. “Things are not looking great in the Holy City.”

I’d never seen Galba so flustered before. The first thing that came to mind was that they’d finally put out a warrant for my arrest, but surely that wouldn’t be worth panicking over.

“What exactly happened?”

“Catherine and I keep in touch regularly, and when you came here, she asked that you return to the Holy City as soon as possible. She didn’t elaborate, though, which is unlike her. I’m almost positive it’s a trap.”

The only reason Galba would tell me this was if Catherine was in some kind of danger. And the reason he wouldn’t ask me outright to help her was because he didn’t want to put *me* in danger. He didn’t need to, though.

“I owe a lot to her, and this nonsense is about me. Frankly, I don’t care if it’s a trap. We’re all together, so I think it’s time we go put an end to this.”

“You’re sure about that? The human supremacists aren’t happy about you coming out as a sage, and this is likely a trick to get you into the executives’

hands. You could be up against the Knights of Shurule. Even if you make it out, your reputation might not.”

Why did everyone I owed a debt to have a habit of hesitating to rely on me? Really, this was about me. It was my responsibility and no one else’s. Assuming this did turn out to be a trap, time was of the essence. Both Catherine and the pope could be in trouble.

“I was planning on going back once word had spread about me being a sage anyway. All this does is move up the schedule a bit. I won’t sit around and watch while the people I care about need my help, especially when I’m the one who put them in harm’s way to begin with.”

Galba looked at me with respect.

“Dhoran,” I said, “how simple is flying the airship?”

“Just needs some mana to get off the ground. Those magic stones you gave us’ll be more than enough to get ’er to the capital,” he replied.

Pola and Lycian clutched their magic satchels to their chests. Surely my own mana would be enough to get us there, right? If not, I had plenty of potions to use. I just didn’t want to make the trip by myself.

“You guys okay with another escapade?”

Lionel smiled and nodded. Everyone else soon followed suit.

Suddenly, Galba wrapped his arms around me. “Thank you, Luciel.”

“D-Don’t mention it,” I replied shyly. “Tell Master I’m sorry we won’t get to have those sparring matches.”

I wasn’t used to seeing Galba so meek. But Brod was definitely going to be in a bad mood for the rest of the day. I could already hear him grumbling about how I’d left him out of the fun.

“Right. I’ll go prepare for the aftermath.” With that, Galba left the mess hall.

I turned to the others, and Ketty said, “Guy’s so got a crush.”

Galba? On Catherine? Maybe. Galba was a gentle guy, and Catherine could get a job done. They made a decent pair.

I apologized to everyone and then got to deciding on a game plan. I was a member of the Church, so I had to proceed carefully—not that I wouldn't stand up for myself if push came to shove, but I was hoping it wouldn't come to that. If the human supremacists were after HQ's downfall, though, we had to prepare for the possibility that some of the executives had been demonized. Especially now that Lord Reinstar's barrier around the city technically wasn't there anymore.

"We're about to go to the Holy City. To finish this," I declared. "Assuming everything goes smoothly, I'd like to spend some time in Grandol leveling up. Is everyone okay with that?"

"We follow where you go. Your wish is our command," Lionel said. Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Thanks, but it's a request. Not an order."

There was no replacement for having friends you could lean on. I only hoped it would be enough and that Her Holiness was still safe.

13 — Takeoff

Together, we left the Adventurer's Guild and passed through the outer gate of the city. About three hundred meters down the highway, we veered off onto a grassy plane. Lionel summoned the airship from his magic bag, and the way it slipped out looked almost comical. How did that thing even fit in there?

My amazement, however, was drowned out by another's.

"Well, damn! That girl really fly? Gotta hand it to you, Dhoran, you're a genius."

"Only thanks to the materials your boy got me," the dwarf replied bashfully. The two were pretty much on the same wavelength.

"You're coming with us, Master?" I asked.

Galba had woken up Brod to fill him in. As expected, he was less than happy about me going back so soon, but when he heard we'd be going by airship, he had insisted on taking the trip with us. Gulgar and Galba really had him on a leash—it was a shame he never learned. I couldn't have been the only one who wondered why Galba himself didn't just take over as guildmaster.

"Hell yeah, I am. I let Gulgar know where I'd be," Brod said.

"And he just let you go?"

"Hey, he knows where I'll be. And since when does Galba get all panicked like that? They'll understand."

Brod was beaming widely, when all of a sudden a second smiling figure emerged behind him.



“Very interesting. I suppose I can stop helping you train and do paperwork, seeing as you’ve got the free time to go on vacation.”

It was Galba. Even in the morning sun, he’d gone completely unnoticed until just that moment.

“When, uh...when did you get there?” Brod asked.

“Oh, around the time you started grinning. You really put Gulgar in a bad spot, you know.”

“Hey, I’ll bring some souvenirs!” my master replied nonchalantly.

Galba only continued to smile. I wanted nothing to do with whatever was going on with them, so I turned to Dhoran.

“The ship looked pretty stable when I saw it yesterday,” I said. “Is it a smooth ride?”

“She uses wind barriers, so about as smooth as can be,” Dhoran answered. “Not much she can do against monsters, though. If things get hairy, we’ll have to stop ’er so we can get out and deal with the issue.”

Excuse me, but I was the only one capable of moving through air. I did not like that implication. As such, I refused to plant the idea in anyone’s head. Brod and Lionel might have been able to do something with those air slash attacks had their levels been the same as before, but as things stood, I was pretty much the only offensive capability the airship had. Unless...

“Would we be able to outrun a potential threat if I used defensive magic?” I asked.

Dhoran hummed in thought. “Most monsters, maybe. Can’t say if we were up against a wyvern or somethin’, though.”

“I’ll handle those cases if you can keep them to a minimum.”

As long as we weren’t talking Eternal Dragons, I was confident I could handle a small drake like a wyvern. Or so I liked to believe. Zero combat whatsoever was, of course, always the ideal. Substance X would be a good deterrent to potentially use, but that felt akin to a war crime. The potential for innocent casualties passing us below or altering the course of natural evolution of local

fauna was too great. That measure would have to wait for a rainy day.

Lionel and the others did some preliminary checks, then signaled to Dhoran that all was well.

“All right, lemme show you inside,” the dwarf said. He approached the ship, and as if sensing his presence, a circular platform descended in front of us.

“A magic elevator?” I asked.

“Pola and Lycian put it together right under my nose. Could hardly believe my eyes when I saw it.”

It was a little fancy but pretty convenient, so credit where it was due. It seemed big enough to handle five or six people at a time.

I hopped on, and once the lift had carried me to the top, I was met with a surprisingly vast interior. It was *way* bigger than the exterior had led me to believe.

“Is this...”

“Space expansion!” Pola blurted out proudly. Her face couldn’t have gotten any smugger.

But then I noticed that we were missing a few. Only Pola, Lycian, Nadia, and Lydia were on the lift.

“Where did Master and Dhoran go?” I asked.

“Ladies first. And you. Grandpa and the other old guy are coming next,” Pola said.

I could only dream of the kind of bravery one would need to call Brod “old guy.” When had they even stepped away? I’d been too absorbed in the airship to notice. Then again, being confused about the machinations of dwarves was just what they wanted, so I put it out of my mind.

“Space expansion, you said? You’ve really outdone yourself. I’ve seen it before, but this is something else.”

“I expanded it by a factor of five. It’s big.”

From the outside, it looked about ten meters long and seven meters wide,

which would make the interior—post-expansion—1,750 square meters. That was even bigger than the Adventurer’s Guild training hall.

“Big is one word for it, I guess!”

In an instant, it had gone from small plane to jumbo jet. Pola flinched at my exclamation, but her smugness remained.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” I told her. “Anything else special I should know about?”

So began the tour that Pola and Lycian quickly managed to turn into a competition. First were the private rooms, each coming equipped with a full-sized bed, a dresser, and even a whole bathroom. There was also a dining area, storage space, and even work stations that they’d clearly indulged in.

“How necessary were these?” I asked.

“Very,” Pola stated.

“Here, we can design the magic artillery and even craft simple items,” Lycian explained.

“I see.” I had nothing more to say on the matter.

After the tour, they guided us to the control room. The door opened automatically, which I found a bit much, but I was far past the point of caring. My Master and the rest of the group were already sitting around inside.

“Took ya long enough,” Brod said impatiently.

“I’d like to hurry, if it’s all the same to you,” said Galba.

“Sorry. We can go now. Dhoran?”

“C’mere first, Luciel.” Dhoran beckoned me over. “Register yourself for the controls here.”

“Sure. Wait, I can drive it?”

“You do own it. It ain’t so hard either, so just lemme know if you feel like takin’ ’er for a spin.”

He made it sound like no big deal, but I was honestly too nervous that I’d crash and kill us all.

“I’ll pass for now.”

“Gotcha. We’ll just get ya set up. Imbue this crystal with your magic.”

I placed my hand on the crystallized half sphere resting on the pedestal and let my mana trickle through it as I was told. The crystal glowed for a moment, then dimmed.

“Did it work?” I asked.

“Like a charm. Now do it again with a little more oomph.”

I did so, and the airship hummed to life. And then, like magic, the walls vanished and gave way to sprawling scenery. The entire front half of the cockpit became like glass. Dhoran looked at my stunned expression with a proud smirk.

“That crystal there’s the start switch,” he explained. “Touching it’ll tap into the onboard mana, and you can refill it there too. Our engineering room’s got a core you can do it at.”

“This isn’t just you, is it? The other craftsmen at Rockford chipped in,” I surmised.

“They owed a lot to ya for dealin’ with those ants. Consider this their show of gratitude.”

“I’ll never get over how talented everyone is.”

Lord Reinstar would be glad to know that his city of artisans was still in top form. The reason the Church wasn’t had to be because Her Holiness had lost her supporters over the years, and her father had failed to implement a way out for her.

“Now, takin’ off and landin’s pretty much the same,” Dhoran continued. “Push the crystal in. If you’re in the air, you’ll land, and vice versa. She only moves forward, but just wave your hand whichever way you wanna turn or increase speed. Wave the opposite way to slow down.”

“Easy enough.”

“Shurule doesn’t have much in the way o’ mountains, but pullin’ this lever on the left’ll raise the altitude. Just put it back to bring ’er level again.”

It was just like the gear shift of a car. Simple to understand, but I wouldn't stop being nervous until I got the hang of it.

"Maybe I will give it a try if you can keep an eye on me," I said. "What if any monsters show up?"

"Just park us in the air. Someone'll have to take 'em out before we run outta mana." He made it sound so simple.

"Expedite that magic artillery, will you?"

Dhoran cackled. "Will do. She'll need a name when we finish up too."

"I'll start thinking of one." I turned to everyone. "Sorry for the wait. Our destination is the Holy City. Apologies in advance if the flight's a bumpy one."

After a deep breath, I pushed in the crystal. The ground beneath us began to sink away as the machine rose, silently, without a single bump or sway. Eventually, it stopped. My heart pounded in my ears, and I slowly moved my hand forward over the half sphere.

"Airship away!" I announced.

Cheesy as it was, I couldn't help myself. And so our airship took to the sky.

The ship proceeded towards the Holy City at what had to have been over a hundred meters in the air. Of the five speeds, it was set to max. To answer the question of "why," we'll have to backtrack two hours: I was astounded by the perfect smoothness with which the ship flew. "This is amazing, Dhoran."

He chuckled. "Feel free ta speed us up when ya get comfortable."

And then he went off to take a seat. I looked out at the scenery, at the rapidly changing hills and trees, and it all looked so new from up here. At the lowest speed, it felt like the pace of a comfortably trotting horse. Maybe thirty kilometers an hour, if I had to guess. Making sure there wasn't anyone below us, I moved my hand forward on the crystal to accelerate. We then coasted at about the speed of an average gallop, the kind Forêt had to consciously slow herself down to when running with other horses.

The speeds seemed to increase in increments of thirty kilometers per hour. It

was a little hard to tell without the feel of the wind, so it was definitely more like a car than a motorbike. I realized it was a little weird how I was still comparing things to my past life after all this time, but my nervousness was starting to dissipate.

“What level... How fast were you guys going when you left Yenice?” I asked Dhoran. It felt a little weird asking “what level were you at?” when talking about speed, so I corrected myself midsentence.

“The third level, as I recall,” he answered. He seemed to get the gist anyway. That was probably at least as fast as Forêt at a full gallop, maybe even faster.

That I had to see. “Let’s try it out, then.”

I accelerated up to the third speed level. Until then, it had just been a test-drive, but considering we were in familiar territory, I could safely kick things up a notch. The journey from Merratoni to the Holy City was smooth—nothing would be in our path this high up—and the ship cut through the wind like a knife through butter. It felt like speeding over a freshly paved highway, except without the fear of losing traction because we were flying. Plus, according to how Dhoran said the propulsion worked, we wouldn’t have to worry about any birds jamming the propellers like a normal jet. The only thing we had to worry about was monsters.

That, and time. By Galba’s estimation, our adversaries would need a good amount of time to set up whatever trap they had in mind. When I explained what had happened after my return from Neldahl, he had judged that the knights likely hadn’t been fully prepared...meaning we had a chance to get the drop on them or even foil their plots entirely.

And then there was my master. Normally, he would have never given up the chance to poke fun at Galba for being so uncharacteristically impatient, and yet he was oddly quiet. He’d been so full of energy before, almost childishly so. The lack of sleep coupled with motion sickness had apparently taken him out, and no amount of magic could cure him for long. His only request was for us to “get the hell there as fast as possible.” Then, he promptly trudged off to his room, leaving me to pick up the pace.

Brod’s disappearance did, however, give leave for Pola and Lycian to vanish to

their workstations as well, while Lionel and the others left for the dining area with the sisters to exchange details about Blanche and the past few months. Left in the cockpit were me, plus Dhoran and Galba in case of emergency. I would have liked to have gradually gotten used to flying, but the circumstances didn't allow for that. So here I was zooming ahead at full speed.

Although overwhelming at first, my eyes soon adjusted to the increased pace, and right about then was when we passed the village we had previously stopped at. It wouldn't be more than a few hours until we reached our destination at this rate. I'd gotten confident enough to take my eyes away for a moment—only a moment, of course—to see what Dhoran was up to behind me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Workin' on that mana sensor you mentioned before." Back during our first trip to the Kingdom of Dwarves, if I remembered correctly.

"Is that the magic item Lycian made?"

"Just a prototype. Thing barely works as is."

"Hm, yeah. It'd have to be smaller to work as a handheld too. Those two are really amazing. And not just Lycian. Pola worked miracles on this ship."

"Friends, rivals, and colleagues all at once, eh? We owe a lot ta you."

"Not as much as I owe you."

"Yeah, yeah," the dwarf rumbled. I heard a hint of a smile in his voice. Even Galba stopped ominously muttering to himself.

About two hours later, the Holy City at last came into view. I gradually started to decelerate like Dhoran had taught me to do earlier.

"Can you wake Master up, Galba?" I asked.

"Sure thing," he replied, quickly leaving the room.

I sighed. "We've probably been spotted by a few adventurers by now. Let's just hope no one thinks we're a warship." I started looking for a place to land.

"What're you doing? Just bring 'er in," Dhoran said.

“I’m trying to keep us from getting attacked.”

“Unless some bastard’s figured out how ta cut metal, I think we’ll be safe.”

Wait, was that a jab? Was Dhoran actually joking with me? Like, casually?

“We’ve got plenty of fuel, I guess, but better to be careful and save what we can in case we need to make a hasty retreat.”

“Land the thing by the church,” someone said from behind.

“Master? Doing better?” I asked.

Brod and everyone else had appeared in the cockpit.

“Can’t be bedridden when there’s a fight about to happen.”

Brod being in good shape only made me more concerned about landing without informing the pope first.

“We might be able to fit in the training field, but it won’t be long before the knights are on us,” I said.

“It’s not against the law, is it? Full speed ahead, I say. Worst case, we squish a few bugs and go nab the shits who started it.”

“The shame of being done in by their own targets, and with their advantage in numbers, at that, would be too great for them to make the incident public as well,” Lionel added.

True, the Church liked to keep its skeletons in the closet. The idea was totally insane and lacking in subtlety, and I was crazy for actually agreeing with it.

“You can leave the higher-ups to me.” Galba smiled, but there was only murder in his eyes.

“No killing, please. Let’s leave judgment to the pope,” I said.

“Oh, there are worse things than death,” Galba assured me.

I looked away for the sake of my mental well-being and considered our plan of action for when we landed. “If we do land in the training field, we’ll have to stow the ship in a magic bag immediately. Dhoran, Pola, Lycian, think you can hold your own against knights?”

“Dunno about that,” Dhoran replied. “Monsters are one thing, but I’m not so sure I could handle tryin’ not to kill anyone. Most I could do is defend.”

None of them had been in the Labyrinth of Wiles with us, so their levels weren’t on par with ours.

“Nadia and Lydia, could you protect them?”

“I can’t say without knowing our enemy’s strength, but it should pose no issue with the Eternal Dragons’ power,” said Nadia.

“I’ll do what I can with the spirits,” said Lydia.

Right, they hadn’t actually fought the Knights of Shurule before.

“If it comes to fighting, I’ll throw up Area Barrier on everyone and stick with support magic. Best case scenario, though, we do this peacefully. There’s something I need to confirm first, so no one throw the first punch. All right?”

“Got a hunch?” Brod asked.

“Something like that. We might not actually be up against the Knights of Shurule. If that’s the case, I’ll need everyone’s help. Galba, feel free to go search for Catherine.”

“Thank you,” he said.

I smiled. “This is my responsibility, after all.”

The airship entered the skies above the city. Down below, I could just barely make out the citizens stopping on the street, gaping up at us, I had to imagine. Things were going to get loud pretty soon.

I brought the ship around to the back of HQ and hovered above the training field. A swarm of knights came rushing towards us.

“I knew we’d get surrounded,” I muttered. “Landing now.”

Everything suddenly got quiet. I turned around and everyone was already gone.

“Is fighting all they can think about?” I grumbled.

Ignoring the creeping loneliness, I brought the airship down, ever so slowly and carefully. Luckily, I managed to make my first landing without crushing

anyone.

I sighed. “No time for a break. How do I turn this thing off, anyway?” The ship remained on, even after I took my hand off the crystal. Finally, a dozen or so agonizing seconds later, it went quiet. “Oh. It’s automatic. Well, let’s do this.”

I left the cockpit. It was time to end this charade.

14 — Friend or Foe

I chased after everyone, but by the time I got to the lift it was already going down.

“Wait, I’m coming too!” I shouted.

“Whoops! Forgot aboutcha,” Dhoran said.

“You’re slow,” jeered Pola.

“Hurry up!” Lycian cried.

This was just cruel. I hopped onto the lift as it descended. At the bottom waited the Knights of Shurule. But something was off. Their bafflement at the airship was understandable, at least, though some were hesitantly lowering their swords at the sight of Brod. Knights who weren’t familiar with him, however, were armed and ready. I’d expected at least a few to lower their guard once I entered the scene, but none did.

“Master, Lionel, they haven’t attacked yet, have they?” I asked. “Where’s Galba?”

I scanned the area and found him among the knights, standing next to Catherine. Strangely, though, she and her knights seemed to be facing off against the Valkyries. What in the world was going on here?

“The damsel in distress turned out to be the one leadin’ the pack,” Brod said.

“Then the Valkyries were the ones in danger?” But that couldn’t be right. Catherine wouldn’t hurt them. Would she?

“So it would seem,” Lionel replied. “Perhaps they’ve been placed under arrest as hostages. As a means to force your hand.”

“That’d do it,” I admitted. “Good thing we got here first, then. Can you put the airship in your bag?”

“Yes, sir.” Lionel touched the ship and stowed it in his magic bag, quickly arming himself with the fire greatsword and a large shield.

I started towards Catherine and the Valkyries. Although I expected someone

to try and stop me, the rest of the knights remained frozen in place. Maybe they would have acted had it just been me, but many knew Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin well, and they served as exceptional deterrents.

“I’m here, just like you asked,” I called out to Catherine. “Can you explain what’s going on?”

“You didn’t waste time,” she replied. “I expected you to arrive later and with fewer guests.”

“I can be an all-powerful sage and still be a coward.”

She smiled gently. “Passivity always was your style.”

I glanced over at the Valkyries and their aggressors. Some were injured—on both sides. I snapped my fingers, and an intricate magic circle appeared at everyone’s feet, casting Area Middle Heal on anyone within. I’d been silently casting it while talking to Catherine, to be honest. The snapping had just been for fun. And partly to show off, because the more intimidated people were by sages, the safer I’d be. Many of the knights could probably sense magic, but seeing as their attention was being diverted to Brod and Lionel, no one seemed to notice. The crowd began to murmur upon seeing their wounds heal out of nowhere.

Now, the line between friend and foe was looking a little blurry. I needed to decipher who was who.

“First question,” I said. “Why do you have Lumina and her Valkyries surrounded?”

The clamor immediately died down. Silence fell, and no one dared break it.

Catherine was the one to do it. “It’s complicated. I see we’re in the clear now that you’ve brought an army, though. Mind ridding me of this icky contract?”

She sheathed her sword, and I sensed she meant us no harm. Her sudden request had not implied the danger had by any means passed, though. Hearing about what kind of contract she was under would have to wait. I wasn’t actually sure if Purification would do the job, but I tried it anyway.

“Contracts aren’t curses, so I’m not positive if this’ll work,” I said.

“Human supremacists rule the Executive Division,” Catherine blurted. “Looks like it did the job. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, about that explanation...”

“Just a moment.” She addressed the soldiers behind her. “Knights of Shurule, the rumors you have heard regarding Luciel the S-rank are false. Agents within the Executive Division would use this to desecrate and ultimately overthrow the Church of Saint Shurule. As its defenders, it is our duty to rid ourselves of this rot!”

Over half of the knights sheathed their blades and saluted in obedience. But others did not.

“I’m sorry about this,” I said to Lumina. “But I’m glad I got to see you again.”

“Luciel,” she muttered. “Why did you return?”

“The plan was to wait until word spread that I’d become a sage, but Galba heard from Catherine that things had gone from bad to worse. So I rounded up my friends and came running. What happened here, exactly?”

“We were charged with assisting in your escape and were thus to be detained. Captain Catherine was tasked with the mission as punishment for failing to capture you.”

If they couldn’t outright do harm to the pope, the next best thing was holding the Valkyries hostage, and Catherine was the only one even remotely capable of doing that.

“By the executives?” I asked.

“I’m certain. No one else but the pope herself could order the captain to do such a thing.”

“How familiar are you with them?”

“Only in passing, though I have heard whisperings that it is ruled largely by corrupt clergy and healers.”

“Then we’ll have to separate the good from the bad, huh?”

“You don’t mean...”

“It seems to me like we’ve got a few dishonest elements in play,” I said, smiling confidently. “Give me a moment to talk with them.” I turned to the knights. “Mind if I say a few words, Catherine?”

“By all means,” she replied.

“Appreciated. Now, the Church’s best has my apologies for the panic I caused the other day. I am the S-rank healer, just recently proven sage, who you have been ordered to arrest.”

I looked out over the crowd. Most were attentive while others wore angry grimaces. With my master on alert with everyone else, no one could make a move.

“Although this might come as a surprise to you,” I continued, “I have no ill will against the Executive Division. What I will say, however, is that some within HQ are foreign agents who do not have the Church’s best interests at heart, and they seek to sabotage me.”

Everyone—that is, Lumina and the knights—gaped in shock...though I didn’t know whether that was because I wasn’t mad at the executives or because there were spies in the Church.

“It’s highly likely that these individuals have infiltrated the executives, and it’s my goal to root them out and bring them before Her Holiness. I only ask that the knights stand down so that we can avoid any more senseless bloodshed.”

“You’re serious?” Catherine finally said.

“Very. Now, if you’ll show me to the Exec—”

The sharp twang of metal against metal rang out. Brod had deflected a dagger heading straight for me from my blind spot, and the blade was wet with poison. Not that it would have worked against me in the first place.

“Not even S-rank healers are above the law, my boy.”

I turned towards the direction of the dagger, and who did I see but Bulteuse, a wide grin on his face.

“Ah, Bulteuse. It’s been a while,” I said. “I was really hoping I wouldn’t have to suspect *you* of being the agent.”

And yet things were going pretty much exactly as expected. At this rate, someone was bound to turn into a demon. I confirmed everyone's locations and quickly prepared to cast defensive magic on our allies at a moment's notice.

"Don't make me laugh," he spat. "Catherine here leaks information to numerous parties, yet you'd place the sin at *my* feet?"

"Of course not. Any kind of information sharing is betrayal as far as I'm concerned. The difference is whether it's with Her Holiness's permission."

Bulteuse simply nodded. "And Catherine has acquired said permission?"

"That, I can't say. What I can say, however, is that it's unquestionably treason to leak secrets that could be used to harm the Church, regardless of whatever moralistic logic puzzle you frame it around."

"I see. Now tell me, are you aware of the Executive Division's role?"

"I'm afraid I was only made aware of their existence the other day. I'd be willing to wager you need more staff, though, seeing as you were willing to tarnish my reputation and hurt my friends over hearsay that you failed to adequately verify." I had lost my patience the moment they had put others in danger.

"You say we seek to 'sabotage' you?" Bulteuse asked with exaggerated sorrow. "After we've endeavored to dispel the rumors surrounding you?"

He had literally just thrown a poison dagger at me moments earlier. I could not believe this guy.

"Blanche agents have infiltrated HQ. They're abusing this authority to manipulate the system to their sole benefit. And they're doing so under the auspices of human supremacy, in direct defiance of why the Church and its guilds were founded. Of all of this, I am completely certain, and that's the only reason I've come back."

"Agree to disagree, then. Clearly, it was a mistake to let a stinking beast-lover become the symbol of Shurule."

A segment of the knights broke away at once and surrounded the man in a defensive formation.

“Be careful,” Catherine muttered to me. “Bulteuse was even stronger than me before his injury.”

“Isn’t that why he retired?” I asked.

“That’s what they say.”

So he had likely been healed somehow. Catherine was no pushover, so this wasn’t going to be easy.

“It’s a shame you’d rather find affection with a beast than understand basic logic, Catherine,” Bulteuse ranted. “And you, Luciel. You have my humble apologies.”

He wasn’t even trying to hide the racism at this point.

“For what?” I demanded.

“For foisting the burden of S-rank upon a naive youth and sending him into the world without proper guidance and education.”

“Really? I’m actually quite grateful that you did.”

“Oh?”

“You offered me the chance to see the world free of distractions, to experience things for myself, to meet new people, and to learn and grow on my own...unlike some in the Church who’ve forgotten the definition of honesty and hard work.”

“You’ve certainly grown quite the tongue, if nothing else. Someone ought to have taught you that words are oft best unspoken, lest they become your undoing. Or are you complacent while among your allies?”

“Maybe that’s it,” I said. “I’m not usually one to talk big, but I feel stronger with them here.”

“Honest to a fault. Shame it means little when it will soon come to nothing. Perhaps you will know better in the next life.”

Bulteuse’s eyes shone red for a split second before some of the knights to our rear set upon the Valkyries. That crimson glow—the same kind emitted by the Wicked One, Vlad, and the demons—never meant anything good.

The Valkyries were seasoned fighters, and they defended against the sudden ambush skillfully. Their counterattack began soon after. Now might have been a good time to try out that new technique I'd developed for use against the Wicked One, especially if those red eyes meant what I thought they did. It was only a matter of time before the knights came after us, but I trusted Brod and the others to keep them back while I did my thing.

"Thanks for the sermon. Let me repay you with my brand new spell," I said. *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Wash away these demonic impurities and engulf them in a cleansing sea. Purification Wave!"*

White light rippled outward from me in waves. I had come up with this idea in Neldahl, in case the Wicked One ever came back with an army of demons and I was surrounded. Sanctuary Circle was effective, sure, but its area of effect was small and meant for only a few opponents at once. I also wanted to test out if I could revert someone who'd been demonized.

Something went wrong, though. Behind us, I suddenly heard women shrieking. When I turned around, Lucy and Elizabeth were convulsing on the ground. Had I used Sanctuary Circle...

I shook the thought from my head. "Lumina, are either of them human supremacists? Are they from Blanche or Illumasia?"

"Elizabeth is from Blanche, as I recall, but Lucy was born and raised Shurulian. And none of them should be prejudiced in any way," she replied. "Do you know what pains them?"

She probably knew it had something to do with the spell I'd just cast. But why had it affected them? I wasn't positive, but I had a hunch.

"They were probably demonized—or were about to be," I said. "Do you know if either of them are close to anyone from the Executive Division?"

"Demonification?! The Valkyries are always together! How— Why only them?!" Lumina was beside herself, and for good reason. They were a family.

I scanned the others. The majority of the knights were still petrified by the situation, and my companions left the incapacitated ones where they fell, writhing in pain. Only Bulteuse and three other knights managed to remain

standing. The miasma emanating from their bodies seemed to have weakened the spell. Dozens of others, however, including Lucy and Elizabeth, collapsed in pain.

“I think I can help them,” I told Lumina. “But I need to be sure they aren’t working against us.”

“I would stake my life on it!” she insisted.

“Stake it on a contract. Make them swear to never do harm to you or Her Holiness. The punishment can be something simple, like sudden drowsiness.”

Lumina gritted her teeth. “Very well.”

It was understandable that she’d feel hurt to have people she trusted so deeply have doubt cast upon them. But years could change a person, and being close to them only made it harder to notice sometimes. I didn’t want to believe they’d betray us either. Still, the fact was they’d been demonized. We couldn’t get swept up in our emotions.

“Lucy, Elizabeth,” she said, “you heard him, didn’t you? Swear to me you aren’t working for the executives. Swear to me you’re not spies. Lie to me and forfeit your life as a paladin.”

Okay, that was a bit more than I’d asked for. That was just how much Lumina trusted them. For the entire five years I had known them, the Valkyries had been eleven. No more, no less. Their bonds were ironclad.

“I...swear,” Lucy groaned.

“As do I,” said Elizabeth.

Their bodies glowed and the contract was made. But Lumina messed something up.

“Lumina, we can’t check their status to make sure they still have their class,” I said. “We have no way to tell if they’re lying.”

“Oh, hell!” Lumina blurted.

I smiled snarkily. “Well, it’s not an easy thing to give up, so I think we can trust them anyway.” I started to cast the same spells on them that I had used to cure Lord Wisdom.

Lumina looked at me in surprise. “You’re not going to check?”

They hadn’t hesitated, and I knew Elizabeth at the very least was no good at lying without going red in the face. I’d seen it for myself, even if Saran hadn’t told me so. I didn’t want to go spoiling that for Lumina, though.

“I’ve seen all I need to know how much you trust them. Plus, I think I made someone mad, so we should wrap this up once these two are better.”

That someone cackled. “It’s useless. Not even an S-rank can bring someone back once they’ve been inundated with demonic essence.”

Bulteuse had evidently been listening in, which shouldn’t have even surprised me at that point, given the circumstances. Whatever that “demonic essence” stuff was, it sounded like getting rid of that was the key to curing them. Also, Bulteuse clearly knew quite a bit. I had a good feeling that we’d know the spies by the end of this.

Lumina growled. “Save them, Luciel. I will deal with Sir B... I will deal with *Bulteuse*.”

She shook with rage. It seemed she’d rush in to relieve the man’s shoulders of his head at any moment.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m quite capable of taking care of myself.”

That wasn’t what I’d meant. I didn’t know if she was aware I intended to capture him alive, but there wasn’t going to be much reasoning with Lumina in her current state. The lengths I went to for my friends.

“All right, well, I just finished curing them, so I’ll join you. I still need information, so try not to kill him *too* much.”

“I said I’ll be fine on my... What did you say?”

“I just finished curing them, so I’ll join you, but we can’t kill him too much.”

“You’ve cured them?”

“That’s right. You two can stand now, I assume?”

Lucy and Elizabeth staggered to their feet, examining their bodies.

“Lucy,” Lumina said, her voice shaking. “Elizabeth. You’re okay?”

“I feel fine,” said Lucy. “Better, even. That fatigue that’s been bugging me is finally gone.”

“I feel like a new woman,” Elizabeth remarked.

The two smiled at their captain while she struggled to keep the emotion from her face.

“Good,” Lumina said. “That’s good.”

“Knights of Shurule!” Catherine called out. “You heard everything you need to hear. As your captain, I command you—surround and apprehend the incapacitated!”

The rest of the soldiers finally awoke from their stupor and began to rush to their fallen comrades. Something wasn’t right, though. I had sensed malice from many of the knights, but not nearly as many as had collapsed. And then there was the fatigue Lucy had mentioned.

“Catherine,” I said, “I think there may be others who’ve been inundated with demonic essence without even knowing it.”

“That’s nothing your healing can’t handle, is it?”

She’d given the order with me in mind. The captain sure was decisive. Now I had to play my part.

“Well?” I taunted Bulteuse. “I did what you said I couldn’t, and I’ll do it again for the other knights here. I don’t know what could have possessed you to deal with demonic powers, but it ends here! Traitor!”

“I-Impossible,” he stuttered. “Over a dozen of the most skilled healers failed to undo it, but you managed it *alone*?”

“You tried to undo it? Agree to a few terms and I don’t mind helping you out with that,” I said.

Bulteuse and his lackeys were starting to panic. Hearing that they could regain their humanity, no few of the apprehended knights were wavering, their will to fight shattered. Uncertainty reigned on the battlefield.

“Also, I’m not a healer. I’m a sage,” I declared. “I can’t heal people who want to betray me and the Church, though. Either die a demon or face judgment as a human. It’s up to you.”

Suddenly, the earth shook. I turned to my companions and immediately made eye contact with the perpetrator.

“Dhoran, Pola. What are you two doing?” I asked.

“Hrm?” the dwarf grunted. “Thought we could use a golem if we’re goin’ demon hunting.”

“Demons aren’t people, right? So we can squish them, can’t we?” Pola asked, tilting her head.

What they created utterly dwarfed the five-meter golem they had used in the labyrinth before. This one was easily double that size.



The intense atmosphere was completely ruined by the oversized people-smasher. I did my best to ignore it anyway.

“It’s up to you whether you would rather be squashed by that golem or returned to humanity,” I stated. “With my authority as a sage, I’m hereby temporarily removing the Knights of Shurule from the executives’ command and placing them under Her Holiness. Make your decision.”

Catherine had already given her order, but some of the knights were still hesitant to go against their superiors. We were about one wrong step away from a coup d’état, after all.

The golem stepped forward and the ground rumbled. Oh, how I didn’t envy the people in its path.

15 — Ambitions of the Heart: A Pola Miracle

The knights who had hesitated to act under Catherine's order flew into action at last, apprehending their nearly demonized comrades. Personally, I liked to think it was more me than the giant encroaching golem. I was afraid that people might start swinging swords again, and if the demonized knights had been made stronger, there would have been even more casualties.

"Anyone who's collapsed could be physically enhanced," I announced. "No unnecessary violence."

The Knights of Shurule raised their shields and proceeded more cautiously. It was nice to see them acting like a proper unit when given an objective.

I turned back to Bulteuse and his three knights. "What's it going to be?"

"The Executive Division is ready and willing to die for its cause! For order! For human supremacy! We will not back down!" he bellowed, waving his sword. Didn't look like we'd be avoiding this fight.

"That's a shame. I'd like to ask a question first. You supposedly tout humanity above all else, but you yourself have given up at least half of it to become a demon. Wouldn't that make you a hypocrite? Just wondering, is all."

There was silence. Not just from Bulteuse and his gang, but all the screams and groans of pain suddenly vanished, replaced by bewilderment. And on it stretched.

"Don't tell me." I was the one to finally speak up. "You really didn't think of that?"

I didn't think it was actually possible, but no one had a single word to say. After all that bluster, Bulteuse had gone quiet. His expression hardened, gradually shifting into awkward hesitation, as did those of the other knights.

"These are demons you're talking to here," Brod said. "They could throw themselves on a blade without blinking. You're wastin' your pity."

"Agreed," Lionel said. "They are the enemy of humanity."

For a couple of battle-crazed lunatics, they sure liked to be logical at the weirdest times. Now that they had added some weight to my threats, I had a lot more leeway to try and avoid an all-out brawl.

“I’ll ask this one more time,” I said. “What is your decision? You will be dealt with as a demon and nothing more depending on your answer.”

“Y-You won’t get any information out of a corpse!” Bulteuse stammered. He must have been feeling the pressure if he was already assuming he’d lose in a fight. Something something, words are oft best unspoken, huh?

“No, but we will get it out of Dongahar. I know you weren’t the one to order the arrest of the Valkyries. I bet he feels real proud of himself right about now.”

“W-We didn’t ask for this.”

Wow, he fell right for it. I hadn’t actually been positive about Dongahar until just now. Bulteuse thought he was losing, and that was right where I wanted him to be.

“Wait, you didn’t ask to be turned into demons? Well, why didn’t you say so? Tell me everything you know and I can turn you back.”

“It’s impossible,” Bulteuse said, defeated. “We are bound by contract and cannot speak of prohibited subjects.”

He definitely wasn’t lying. It was too convenient for any organization with secrets not to make use of. Just what were “prohibited subjects,” though? It would be hard to interrogate him without knowing that.

“Don’t think you can get out of spilling things you don’t want to by calling it ‘prohibited,’” I said. “I got rid of Catherine’s contract; I can get rid of yours too. You’re telling us everything.”

“Then may I—”

“First, tell me how you demonified Lucy and Elizabeth,” I interrupted. “Tell me and I’ll fix those three half-demon abominations you’ve got with you.” I turned my gaze on them. “Feel free to answer for him, by the way.”

“I heard they snuck particles of magic stones into the girls’ drinks during their healing when they came back injured from a deployment!” one of the knights

answered immediately.

“There’s a magic circle that befuddles the mind in the clinic our resident healers stay in,” another added.

“They’ve supposedly already conducted experiments on whether demonification can be done without magic stones.”

“Our orders come directly from Sir Bulteuse.”

So much for prohibited subjects. They didn’t look ready to stop, but I had to verify these new discoveries.

“Were you ever injured together on a deployment?” I asked Lucy and Elizabeth.

“About half a year ago,” Lucy replied. “There was a skirmish on the Illumasian-Burkan border, nothing unusual, and a small town in Shurule asked for assistance. Had a run-in with a wyvern, which we got rid of, but some of us got hurt.”

“Healers are rarely stationed so far out,” Elizabeth continued, “so we conducted what first aid we could with our rudimentary holy magic abilities before returning to the capital for proper treatment.”

“Were you given any medicine to consume at the time?” I asked.

“It’s been so long, but I think so, now that you mention it,” said Lucy.

“We lost so much blood, and we truly felt your absence in that moment.”

What Elizabeth meant was they missed having a healer of my capability.

I laughed. “Maybe I would’ve gone with you had I not become an S-rank. Anyway, did anything feel strange after that?”

“They did have us take some kind of medication to help with infections or any lingering side effects,” Lucy said. “They told us magic couldn’t help with those.”

“It’s all so hard to remember after so long,” Elizabeth added.

Even had I been around to help before leaving for Neldahl, I wouldn’t have been much use. Regardless, this medication sounded like a cover for experimentation. The kind that would leave a lot of evidence to uncover.

Judging their story to be accurate, I turned back to the three knights. “All right. As promised, I’ll undo your demonification.”

I gave Ketty and Kefin a silent glance, then got to work. Once the spells had taken effect and the light of Extra Heal had died down, Ketty and Kefin immediately stepped in to restrain the knights. They didn’t resist, possibly from the effects of having just been cured, or maybe out of the sheer emotion of regaining their humanity.

“Like I said, the pope will decide what to do with you,” I told them. “Cooperate and no one else has to get hurt.”

“But feel free to make my day if you’re feelin’ brave,” Brod commented.

“Surely one of you has the guts,” said Lionel.

I grimaced. “Can you guys take it easy? Just stand there and look threatening. Anyway, my next question: why are you only partially demonized?”

Seriously, so much for all the tension. Pola and Lycian were busy playing with that giant golem and couldn’t have cared less about the Church. I had to get the answers I wanted while Dhoran still had his eye on them.

“Prohibited information,” Bulteuse said. “But we sought power for one reason and one reason only—to eradicate the demons and their lord, and to solidify humanity as the dominant race.”

“And how were you planning on doing that? You’re a walking miasma factory. As far as I see it, you’ve just earned yourself a spot on the ‘to-eradicate’ list.”

Bulteuse winced. “All I wanted... All we wanted was to join with that nation of heroes, that we might once more—”

He let out a bloodcurdling shriek as his body suddenly exploded with miasma and his face began to mutate. The knights I’d yet to heal also started to groan as they erupted with the malevolent mist. Their demonification had accelerated immensely.

“The others, I understand, but *you*, Bulteuse?” came a familiar voice. “Such betrayal. Fortunately for you, I am magnanimous. I will allow you forgiveness so that you may wreak havoc upon this blighted land!”

Dongahar cackled maniacally. With him was an entourage of knights, miasma flowing from their bodies much like Bulteuse and his knights earlier, except their skin was faintly purple. Their eyes were dark red and hinted at not a single shred of thought behind them. The term “berserker” came to mind.

“Dongahar,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting the leader of the executives to make a personal appearance. We were just about to pay you a visit.”

I decided to buy some time by keeping him talking. I wanted to see how much control he had over the artificial demons.

“Spare yourself the trouble, sage. It’s the least I can do for a dead man walking.”

He was happy to oblige me with conversation. Clearly, he thought he was playing with all the cards.

“Is that me you’re referring to?”

Dongahar cackled again. “He knows no fear! How very sagely.”

Including Bulteuse, eleven had suffered accelerated demonification. I didn’t know how much stronger that would make them, but they’d likely be more than the average knight could handle, to say nothing of whether the average knight would be capable of bringing a sword down on a former brother-in-arms.

“You’re not wanting for confidence yourself,” I said. “Grant a poor boy’s wish and enlighten him on a few things, won’t you?”

“You’ll not have long to dwell on them, but very well. Perhaps the sage, in all his wisdom, will see reason.”

Coming from the guy who probably needed to make demons or slaves just to have someone agree with him. At this point, I was pretty much positive that he was the one who’d started the demonification experiments in Shurule, and my patience with him was more than expended. Had Her Holiness really not seen this scumbag for who he really was? Had she simply left him alone out of some kind of obligation? Either way, now was my chance to ask questions. The demons seemed to be under control as well.

“There’s supposed to be an anti-monster barrier surrounding the capital. How

were demonized people able to make it into the Church?”

“Please.” Dongahar sneered. “Such a thing has long since vanished. How do you think a labyrinth was able to form beneath our very feet?”

So he’d noticed it. The labyrinth had appeared over half a century ago, but even if Dongahar hadn’t been directly involved in the barrier’s disappearance, he would have known about it.

“Then you knew. Has any effort ever been made to recreate it?”

“Recreate it? The barrier? For what purpose?”

“The Executive Division acts as a correctional force against corruption, does it not? Clearly, you’re willing to go to great lengths to protect the Church, including arresting an S-rank healer.”

“Oh, I see now.” Dongahar’s smile was replaced with a cold, hard glare. “You appear to be under the misapprehension that I bear any sort of love for the Church or its pope. On the contrary, boy, I loathe both of them with every fiber of my being.”

“What? Someone of your status? But you helped create the healing guidelines.”

“And it was a mistake to do so. You weren’t supposed to return from Yenice, much less in so short a time.”

The trip had only been about distancing me. Isolating a meddlesome pest. But then why choose to enact his supposed master plan now?

“I assume you were the one who orchestrated the spread of those rumors,” I said.

“You assume correctly. Their veracity did not matter. Only that unrest was sowed in the Church and that distrust in Her Holiness was planted as was asked of us.”

The pope had mentioned at one point that Dongahar was a skilled diplomat.

“But you weren’t expecting me to come back, were you?”

“That, we were not. Not until we finished settling matters with the pope and

made ready to properly apprehend you.”

So the magic circle returning us to the training field really had been the executives’ doing. This guy was certainly a man of many talents to somehow both facilitate gossip and know enough about teleportation magic to meddle with return circles. Just how much did he hate Shurule?

“Why do you have this grudge against Her Holiness and the Church?”

“Because her idiotic actions and those of her previous ineffectual executives caused the death of my father.”

And there was the motive. If he knew it had something to do with the executives, then surely he knew the pope wasn’t entirely at fault. His hatred was misplaced if the barrier had anything to do with it, at least.

“You’ve lived a long life, though. Is revenge all you’ve ever been after?”

“Revenge? Yes, I suppose you could call it that. As to why it still occupies my mind, well...I have you to thank for that, sage.”

“Me?” What had I ever done to him?

“You conquered the labyrinth, and so Her Holiness told me that my father, who had been abandoned in years past, was finally at peace. She gave me this. All that was left of him. And I remembered.”

“Wait, that staff...” I had brought that very item back with me from the labyrinth.

“It was my father’s,” Dongahar went on. “He maintained the inner sanctum before it became corrupted, you see.”

The final boss of the dungeon. When it had vanished, I’d seen the image of an elderly man. I hadn’t been imagining things. It had been Dongahar’s father.

“Surely you can’t hate the pope simply because she allowed the expansion projects to proceed.”

“You truly believe my hatred is so shallow? No, just before the labyrinth had formed, she told my father she had forgotten something in her chambers. When she bid him retrieve it, he fell victim to the corruption.”

“And that’s why you loathe her.”

“Not quite. Her Holiness treated me well as his son, offered me a place here in the Church, privilege and authority. I was grateful. I did not hate her.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“When I joined the Executive Division, I was granted access to many old records. By mere chance, I stumbled upon one regarding my father. He believed in humanity above all, and for this the executives gave him hell. There was even a document detailing the very incident in which the pope asked him to retrieve her lost item.”

Well, that didn’t sound good. Racism aside, this was looking like he blamed the pope for sending his father to his death.

“I’m sure you’ve already ascertained the accuracy of that report,” I said, “but does that really excuse you repaying the pope’s goodwill with treason?”

“Goodwill?” Dongahar spat. “She did not favor me out of the kindness of her heart. She sought forgiveness from a ghost, because the item she had misplaced was merely her favorite necklace. She told me so herself on the day she ordered no one to attempt to conquer the labyrinth.”

The value of the necklace aside, that would certainly get someone to dislike you. If it was really so important, she should have been wearing it, after all.

“And that’s when you started plotting to overthrow the Church, was it?”

Dongahar huffed. “If that were enough, I would have found the bottom to this endless abyss long ago.” He shook his head. “After the pope gave up hope of ever ridding us of the labyrinth, her organization began to rot on its own. I needn’t have done a thing.”

The Church had sent a number of its best healers and knights down in an attempt to cleanse the labyrinth, but very few had made it back alive. The effects of the power vacuum this left could still be felt to this day. Their forces had been significantly damaged without anything to show for it, so it was no wonder Her Holiness had been relegated to little more than a figurehead. It was a shame, but now I finally understood the context.

“Why not divert that energy into making the Church better? What you’re doing now isn’t what I’d call constructive.”

“Trust that I am grateful for all that you’ve done, sage, regardless of the damage you have attempted to bring to my faction. You not only freed us of the labyrinth, but you uprooted corruption among the healers, thus restoring the honor of the Church of Saint Shurule.”

“It wasn’t just me. The guidelines couldn’t have been finished without your help,” I said.

“What we did pales in comparison to your legacy. It was your youth that lent weight to your miracles, for charisma is the way to people’s hearts. They flock to one who possesses that indescribable quality.”

I didn’t like being complimented by someone like him, but I could tell he meant every word of it. He wasn’t using the Church to try and bring me down—he was using *me* to bring the *Church* down.

“I imagine you’ve had an in with Illumasia and Blanche for a while now, but when did it turn into all this?” I asked.

“‘This,’ you say? What a strange thing to ask from the man who instigated it all. The man who ruined our plans to use a true demon to turn an entire village. Who then fled to Grandol, only to annihilate the low-class demon we had planned to use to send the knights to Blanche—in the middle of its strengthening in a labyrinth, no less. Just how far are you willing to go to stand in our way?”

There was no way Dongahar could have known all that while being stuck here. He had to have co-conspirators, like perhaps Lord Kamiya.

“All that was your doing too?”

“I had some help, of course. You quickly became a thorn in our side, and you had to be dealt with. Despite my best efforts to toss you aside, however, you always came crawling back.”

All that intellect, and he used it for schemes and conspiracies.

“So you used the rumors about me to try and knock me down a peg and

deface the Church.”

“A sullied sage without the power to heal would whip the masses up and make them easier to manipulate, after all. Were that the masses had not already taken a shine to you. Again, despite my best efforts, they could not be swayed.”

Wow, that was actually a little heartwarming.

“You should have called it quits there.”

Dongahar guffawed. “And let such a worthy opponent go to waste? I think not.”

Wait a minute, when did this become about me?

“That’s why you used the Valkyries,” I surmised. “To try and get to me.”

“Do you finally understand? Granted, you outsmarted me yet again with your ability to reverse demonification. But no more. This is where you and the Church of Saint Shurule die, and my vengeance shall be made complete!”

“Just one last question. Who really put together a plot this sinister? As vile as you are, I don’t think you would be the one to propose allowing demons onto the ground where your father sleeps.”

“Smart lad. Unfortunately, my preparations for your funeral are complete. The interrogation ends here.”

I growled. I’d been quietly reverting the eleven knights’ corruption, but I couldn’t make it in time. All I could do was swiftly change casts to Sanctuary Barrier.

“Trying to play the hero again?” Dongahar mocked. “Such bravado.”

The demonized knights attacked the barrier but failed to breach it.

“It makes things harder for you, at least.”

“Oh, we’re already done here,” Dongahar said, chuckling.

“What?”

“Luciel! My mana isn’t responding!” Lumina shouted.

“Physical Enhancement’s not working! What’s the plan?!” Brod roared.

That explained Dongahar’s strange cockiness. He’d been weaving a magic circle to block our magic.

“Silencing,” I murmured.

“I’ve erected a barrier field that nullifies your magic,” Dongahar boasted. “I’m aware of your unsusceptibility to physical conditions, so I thought to circumvent that issue. Now despair as you meet your end!”

He’d done his homework. This was just like the sealing effect used in the tenth floor boss room of the Labyrinth of Trials. It likely wasn’t as strong, though he could probably wield magic himself just fine if the same rules applied.

As expected, Dongahar’s staff shone crimson, and a magic circle glowed into form in the middle of the field. We were sitting ducks. We’d fallen for his trap, and all we could do was wait for the end. The villain, meanwhile, soaked in every moment, laughing as the magic circle etched itself into the ground. It reminded me, frighteningly, much of the light Vlad had given off in Grandol.

“A sage without magic is but a man,” Dongahar jeered. “You were truly worthy prey, my friend!”

Suddenly, a humanoid figure emerged from the magic circle. But it wasn’t human. It bore wings, horns, and a tail.

“Who dares summon ME?!”

The moment the demon-like creature finished manifesting, the golem collapsed towards it, the construct having lost its power. Everyone flinched as the creature scurried away from the falling pile of rocks, though it failed to realize just why everyone was running a moment too late. They hadn’t been fleeing in fear of the demon, but of the once-motile boulders that were now crushing the creature flat.

And then, just like that, the magic was back on.

“Did that break the sealing circle?” I wondered.

Monsieur Luck and Sir Preme Luck be damned. Pola had created nothing short

of a miracle. I immediately returned the demon-knights trapped within the Sanctuary Barrier to their original forms. The most threatening thing about them was their lack of self-preservation, which would have allowed them to bring even Brod down with suicidal assaults. With their minds recovered, though, they wouldn't act so recklessly.

"Some demon," Brod scoffed.

"By all means, keep it summoned as long as you're able," Lionel said.

What was wrong with those two?

"Hey, stop curin' 'em, Luciel!"

"Let us teach them that their little transformation isn't nearly enough to defeat us."

They talked like ravenous beasts, but they still maintained defensible positions to keep me and the knights safe, despite the dissatisfaction they must have felt at having missed the chance for a fight to the death. I just wished they'd stop taunting the enemy.

Then I remembered that those two needed to be fed combat like gas in a car. I looked at the knights and hatched an idea to get back at them for all this nonsense.

"Stop giving the enemy ideas!" I shouted. "You can beat every knight here until they can't stand anymore later, but right now I'm begging you for a scrap of self-control."

Brod clicked his tongue. "Fine, but I'm holding you to that."

"So be it," Lionel said.

The bloodlust left their eyes, so I considered the mission a success. Although the knights went white as ghosts at my proposal, no one had the guts to protest. Technically, a sparring match was safer than a fight with a demon, but the suffering would undoubtedly be equivalent. And that made me happy.

I finished curing all the corrupted knights. The completely vacant men by Dongahar, however, simply collapsed where they stood.

"Everyone's been cured. Someone restrain them," I instructed.

A few knights obeyed at once, so I returned my attention to Dongahar. He was, in short, completely dead inside. His empty eyes stared at the spot where the demon had been, jaw gaping, expression frozen in bemusement.



He had corrupted the knights, diverted our attention with those mindless berserker soldiers, activated a magic sealing circle, summoned a demon, and from the jaws of victory he snatched...defeat. It had been a brilliant plan by any measure, and yet he was laid low by pure chance. He must have been utterly dumbfounded. I honestly felt a little bad for the guy.

Suddenly, the pile of rubble began to stir. Pola the miracle worker had regained control of the golem, and it rumbled back onto its enormous feet. Everyone's eyes turned to where its head had been—where the twitching body of a flattened demon now was embedded in the ground. Somehow, it still breathed, just barely.

"How is that thing still alive?" I heard someone mutter.

I readied the Illusion Staff with all haste, but Dongahar was faster.

"Take my mana and rise!" he cried. "Rain hellfire upon all creation!"

A dark red line of light connected him to the disfigured creature. Its body began to glow and emit miasma. I couldn't let this go on or we'd have a fearsome threat to contend with, and the losses that would create would only weaken the Church even more. There wasn't a moment to waste.

"Holy Dragon, be my purifying blade against—"

Before I could unleash the Eternal Dragon's power, the ground thundered. Pola had gotten to it first. The golem kneeled and fell elbow first onto the demon. A beautiful elbow drop. The demon hadn't healed enough to move, and that was the final nail in its already nail-laden coffin.

Dongahar, suddenly sapped of an immense chunk of his mana due to the damage, crumbled on the spot from magical exhaustion. Pola's golem vanished as well, its role fulfilled. Fear of the demon, shock at its untimely death, and awe at its killer's strength washed over everyone present.

"Gods damn it, we were so close!"

"Such a waste of what would surely have been a thrilling battle."

All present *except* for two battle-crazed lunatics.

I then trapped the demon inside Sanctuary Barrier in an attempt to extract

some information from it, but the thing was as dead as a doornail. Immediately after, I proceeded to cure Dongahar of any demonification just to be safe, and with that, the principal offender was taken into custody.

16 — A Decision

Dongahar, the human supremacist executive, and his supposed assistant, Bulteuse, had both been captured. Our original objective had been to rescue Catherine, but the Valkyries ended up being in greater need of that, and I was glad we'd made it in time. Everything was over, and yet amidst it all—the way the rumors about me hadn't been used for the *good* of the Church, but I'd only been in the way of a plot to *overthrow* the Church—something just didn't sit right. All that was left to do was report to Her Holiness.

If only it were that easy. But there were still questions that needed answers. Pieces missing from the puzzle. Dongahar himself had said that the Church had started to go rotten long before his time. For just as many greedy healers as there had once been, there were clearly just as many bad apples in the Church itself. Although the guidelines had repaired much of our reputation, the good they had done clearly didn't extend to the wrongdoings of the people who enforced them. It was like a disorganized company rampant with embezzlement that suddenly caught on fire the moment you kicked the bee's nest and started requiring audits. Some of the employees correlated their own importance with the worth of said company while new hires were getting riled up and emotional over little rumors. It was a total mess.

Half a century ago, the Church had lost nearly every member that made up its foundation, kept everything together, and the people who took their place, the people who became priests and captains, were mediocre layabouts who never had any ambition in the first place. The Church's fall from grace was all but destined as its new leaders sought to preserve their positions and the status quo. All the while, with the ever-present threat of the labyrinth, the pope had lost nearly all of her authority. Granted, I'd have to confirm the chain of events with her later.

Lord Reinstar's founding principles for this country likely originated from Earth, where life was precious and places existed where it could be nurtured. Records spoke of his search for like-minded companions, Samaritans who endeavored to create the Church—a place where life could be nurtured—and

together they had founded the Healer's Guild. An impossible feat for a single man, but feasible when many act as one. I could only imagine how fulfilling their work must have been. How many times they'd had to rely on healing magic to keep from passing out from exhaustion. The bonds they had forged as their plans grew, took on shape and complexity.

A leader, like a pope or archbishop, needed to stand at the top of such an undertaking, but an organization without ambition beyond greed doesn't seek to be led. And the larger such an organization is, the more fragile it becomes. The directionless vying for selfish gain was what led the Church to become what it was now.

Despite this, however, a corrupt organization is still an organization. The Church was still the Church, and without it, the Healer's Guilds would not function. The people would suffer. Had there been another to pick up the pieces, all would have been well, but there wasn't. The Church could not disappear. Maybe things would have been different with a more charismatic pope, someone like Reinstar, while Her Holiness dedicated herself to more spiritual duties as a mystic, but there was no point in wondering.

Over half of the knights here had believed me to be a heretic, a victim of divine punishment. I didn't like them, to say the least, but that didn't mean their passion wasn't real. I took a deep breath and centered myself.

"Master and Lionel," I said, "keep watch over Dongahar and the demonized knights."

"Got it," Brod replied.

"Yes, sir," replied Lionel.

They nodded and divided their attention among the detained men.

"Lumina, can you and the Valkyries get everyone in HQ to gather out here?" I asked.

"*Everyone?*" Lumina repeated. "Never mind. I understand."

Her girls nodded in affirmation.

"Galba, I hate to ask, but I need you to squeeze out more information about

the Executive Division,” I said. “With Kefin’s help.”

“Understood,” said Kefin.

“What kind of intel are we after?” Galba asked.

“No point in keeping it confidential anymore since it’s already out there. There’s a labyrinth under the Church,” I explained. “It formed about fifty years ago. I’d like you to learn what you can about the circumstances surrounding when they officially gave up trying to clear it out.”

“Got it. I’ll take someone with me who knows where the Executive Division is, if you don’t mind.”

“Right. The rest of you,” I said to the knights, “form up. Her Holiness will be with us shortly. Catherine, if you’ll come with me to fetch her. You too, Nadia and Lydia. The executives could have more up their sleeves.”

“Can do,” Catherine said.

“Of course,” the sisters replied.

Once everyone had their instructions, I turned to the remaining three. “Nice job with that golem, Pola. Dhoran and Lycian, keep an eye on the knights who were demonized.”

“For the magic stones, I guess,” Pola said.

“We’ll nab any runners. Don’t you worry,” said Dhoran.

“Very well,” Lycian affirmed.

Nodding, they fixed their gazes on the knights. I smiled and started towards the pope’s chambers with Catherine in tow.

“You saved the day again, Luciel. Thank you,” she said.

“Galba did most of the work. And Dongahar was after me anyway, so I’m the one who dragged everyone into this.”

“He would have done a lot of harm to the Church sooner or later. It’s a good thing he went down without bringing it with him.”

“If only our troubles ended there,” I moaned.

“True. You’ve grown into your rank fairly well, though, I must say. Holy magic always was your forte, but now you can even beat me in a fight. Maybe even Lumina.”

I remembered Galba mentioning I had apparently broken her prized sword and that I’d forgotten to apologize for it.

“I’m sorry about your sword, by the way. I was kinda improvising at the time.”

“It’s nothing. It kept my superiors off my back, and they even bought that I had a grudge against you for it anyway.” She smiled, though it wasn’t very convincing. I had to make it up to her with Galba’s help somehow.

“Well...that’s good.”

“Anyway, what are you planning, bringing Her Holiness out to the training field?” Catherine asked.

“I’m going to ask her to make a decision,” I replied. “She can either stay the pope or she can resign her position then and there.”

She stepped in front of me and stopped me in my tracks. “Wait just a minute! If you’re trying to sway Her Holiness into giving up all she’s worked for, I won’t let you!”

I thought I’d been pretty clear about letting the pope decide how we’d wrap this up, but at least there could be no doubting Catherine’s loyalty. She looked about ready to cross blades with me. Nadia and Lydia were at a loss.

“Change won’t come to the Church on its own, Catherine. Unless Her Holiness can stand up and prove her resolve, history will only repeat itself until everything falls apart for good. Ideals and messages mean nothing unless you can uphold them.”

I slipped past her, but she stepped in front of me again.

“You know more than anyone how much she agonizes over Shurule and its people. You would discredit that?”

“I’m not discrediting anything. I’m simply demanding a reason to follow her. Her Holiness is a gentle, kind, and selfless soul—I’m well aware of that—but thoughts and prayers won’t mean anything without the will to *act*. And how

many people in the Church do you believe have that right now?"

Without a solid plan for the future, hopes and dreams would remain just that. Catherine knew the Church of Saint Shurule's future was at stake here, so she didn't stop me again.

I couldn't say why Catherine was so adamant about the pope, but I did understand. She'd done a lot for me, and I wanted to repay that debt. But I also thought it would be disrespectful to believe she'd give up the papacy so readily.

We arrived at the pope's chambers, and Estia met us at the door.

"You're back," she said. The Spirit of Dusk didn't seem to be in control at the moment.

"Sorry for leaving you here," I said.

"Oh, no, I've enjoyed my time with Her Holiness." Estia beamed. "She's taught me a lot about how to control Dusk's power."

"We'll be making good use of that."

"Y-Yes, sir. Ah, right, come in!"

We entered the room. It had been cleaned up since the last time, but the only other occupants were Rosa and the pope herself. Her attendants were still nowhere to be seen.

"Many things have happened, Your Holiness. So I've returned early," I said.

"It gladdens me to see you well," the pope replied.

"Are your attendants still being kept away?"

"As of now, they are working in the dining hall in Rosa's place. I see you've also brought Catherine."

"Yes, Your Holiness. Pardon my brevity, but the reason I returned was because I believed she was in danger."

"Danger?!"

"Luciel!" shouted Catherine.

I had a reason for being blunt, of course. I wanted to see how Her Holiness

would react upon hearing that one of her own had been in trouble.

“We didn’t come here to lie to her, Catherine,” I said.

“I take it her presence here means the danger has passed?” the pope asked.

“Yes, Your Holiness. However, this is where things get complicated, so first I’d like to ask about my favor from last time. Were the guilds and regiments on deployment informed of my sagehood?”

“Her Holiness sent word to every Healer’s Guild she was able to, while I spread word from the dining hall,” Rosa said.

She must have been at risk because of me as well. I felt guilty.

“Thank you. Returning to the main topic, I learned many things in Merratoni. Most pressingly, there’s a foreign agent within Church Headquarters.”

“What?!” Her Holiness exclaimed.

“I’m not privy to the details, but Catherine shares information with a friend of mine, and it’s thanks to her that we resolved things relatively peacefully.”

“The matter we discussed?” she asked Catherine.

“Yes, Your Holiness,” Catherine replied.

So she did have permission. One less matter to deal with.

“It’s that friend of mine who informed me of the spy, and that information is what led us to the mastermind behind the rumors,” I went on.

“Who is it?” the pope asked.

“I do apologize for taking matters into my own hands against your wishes. I would like to inform you, however, that an emergency forced me to do so. The spy has been captured and is currently being held at the training field.”

“Wh-Who is it?!”

She seemed more interested in that than when I had mentioned the mastermind. The traitor was a little more personal, after all.

“Dongahar, who I believe leads the executives. His assistant and former templar captain, Bulteuse, as well as a portion of human supremacist knights

have all been restrained and are in our custody.”

“Dongahar... You’re certain?”

It didn’t look like she wanted to believe it. But we’d heard it from the horse’s mouth.

“Yes, Your Holiness. He was trying to take the Valkyries as hostages to draw me back. We fought for a moment before capturing him, and he had attempted to turn many of the knights into demons through the dark arts.”

The pope swooned, and Rosa had to hold her steady. “Into *demons*, you say? Here? Inside our very borders? These are not atrocities being committed abroad?”

“That’s right. These very demonification methods are being used in Illumasia and Blanche as well. I never expected to encounter them here, much less against our own knights.”

“Gods above...”

“You can rest easy knowing I’ve cured them all and returned them to normal, though.”

“And I shall. Still...” She fell deep into thought.

“I’d like you to accompany me back to the field,” I said before she could get too lost. “It’s up to you to deliver judgment, and I’ll abide by whatever you decide. Even should you pardon them in light of their service.”

“Luciel?!” Catherine blurted.

Despite her reaction, I felt like I was only being fair. And I didn’t say I had to like the pope’s decision. Only that I’d accept it.

“Your love for the Church is not lost on me. It’s your father’s legacy. No doubt you hold a strong attachment to it,” I said.

“Luciel,” the pope breathed.

“But this tragedy has made me realize something. It was your lack of decisive judgment as the Pope of Shurule that allowed the selfish and cowardly to take hold of your ranks.”

Silence fell. Her Holiness was a gentle person, but without a firm hand to punish wrongdoings, wrongdoings would persist.

“I think kindness and love are great things,” I continued. “I myself have benefited from yours greatly. But there is a difference between kindness and indulgence.” They were words I borrowed from Lionel and my master, but I meant them nonetheless.

“Kindness...and indulgence?” the pope echoed.

“Take a child, for instance. If they misbehave, what should the parent do?”

“Scold them, of course.”

“Right. But is that out of anger or hatred?”

“Surely not. They must be taught right from wrong so that they mature into an upstanding individual.”

“Exactly. It’s a kindness, because the parent is considerate of the child’s future. If they were to *indulge* the bad behavior, however, to simply accept it under the assumption that they’ll one day grow out of it, what do you suppose would happen?”

“They would not understand right from wrong.”

“Were you ever scolded as a child, Your Holiness?” I asked.

“Many times...long, long ago, but...”—she smiled wistfully—“they are not painful memories.”

“We’re only men and women, not gods. We make mistakes, and those mistakes need to be acknowledged and corrected. I believe the current state of the Church is the product of apathy in that regard.”

The pope trembled. “Thus you would have me deliver judgment upon Dongahar and his conspirators.”

“Placing this responsibility on you certainly weighs easier on my mind, but I truly believe that the Church has no future unless you can fulfill your role as its leader and display true, assertive decisiveness. If you can’t make a decision on your own, by all means speak with someone about it. In the end, though, *you* will bear responsibility. It’s the least you can do after years of silent

compliance.”

I heard the sound of scraping metal. Nadia stopped Catherine mere moments before she could draw her sword completely while Lydia pointed her staff at her.

“Do not make me cut that tongue from your throat, Luciel,” she growled.

I had no intention of retracting any of my statements. I ignored her and addressed the pope once more.

“I would ask your will, Your Holiness. Uphold the ideals this nation was founded on?” I lowered my head. “Or leave it to rot in its grave?”

17 — Poisons, Prostrations, and Paradigm Shifts

An orderly formation of knights and healers was waiting for us when we arrived at the training field. In front of them all stood Brod and the others, watching over Dongahar and his formerly demonized knights, who sat on the ground in binds. Even the two vacant soldiers had finally woken up, and they, too, were restrained. Everyone present looked on in shocked silence as we escorted Her Holiness over.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said. “Her Holiness will now address the events that have just transpired. If you will, Your Holiness.”

The pope stepped forward, her posture stately, and she looked down on the traitors. “Dongahar,” she spoke, “has the Church truly blackened your heart with hate?”

He jumped in surprise but righted himself. “You are mistaken, Your Holiness,” he replied, smiling gently. “The Church has been, is, and always will be my home; its people, my family.”

These words she shared with Dongahar were all she had asked for in exchange for coming out here.

“I would like some time to speak with him before I make my decree,” Her Holiness had said to me, her voice barely a whisper.

“You are free to handle the situation as you wish,” I had replied. It’d been a strange request, but I had already long decided to cede the stage to her.

Dongahar’s expression was not that of a liar when he spoke of the Church so tenderly. He was like a different man from the one so consumed by anger before.

The pope nodded, smiling. “Then we are of like mind,” she said. Her expression quickly clouded over. “This begs the question, though. Why perpetuate the rumors? Why become an agent? Why stain your hands with the dark arts and allow demons into our abode?”

“I have done a terrible thing—this I do not dispute.” He looked at me, then

back at the pope. “But the things people were saying about Sage Luciel were frighteningly believable. I did what I did for the good of the Church.”

“Indeed, should the rumors have proven true and Luciel had lost his powers of healing, the effects would have been immeasurable. Immeasurable, but surely not insurmountable.”

“You cannot know that! The Church is putrid to its core. Our only recourse was to burn it down before it could fester any more!”

I failed to hide my shock. I had been operating under the assumption that the Executive Division was the behind-the-scenes source of corruption, but the way Dongahar spoke made it sound like *the other way around*. The Church was on a path to recovery, so where in the world could it have been coming from?

“What? I am told that we are in the process of regaining our once-lost respect,” Her Holiness said.

“Very little has changed, Your Holiness. The ratification of the guidelines and the restoration of the Yenice Healer’s Guild have served only to lift up the healers. The people no longer despise them.”

“Then surely this reflects on the Church as a whole.”

I was just thinking the same thing myself. What I hadn’t been expecting was Dongahar’s answer.

“It may be more apt to say it’s not that the people have come to respect healers, but that they have come to respect *Luciel*. Just as they adore the Valkyries—*not* the Knights of Shurule. Do you not see what that indicates?”

“Preposterous. The goodwill has extended to all healers, of this I’m sure.”

“To those with lofty ideals,” Dongahar corrected her. “Individuals who would satisfy themselves before others are the subject of ridicule. And for me and mine, we have come under criticism for having not written the guidelines sooner.”

“But how did it come to this?” the pope demanded.

“Neglect, Your Holiness. Decades upon decades of neglect. Legions of unprincipled healers sent into the world without guidance. An unwillingness to

send any more than the bare minimum of forces when the knights are needed against monstrous threats.”

“You cannot mean to imply...”

“But I do. It began with the labyrinth,” he stated. “And these circumstances mean nothing to the ignorant public.”

“The citizens have come to have faith in us again ever since Luciel attained the rank of S,” the pope argued.

“Exactly. Without him, the Church and its healers would yet remain sources of evil. His medicine, however, is potent enough that it has become a poison.”

I listened intently. I didn’t recall doing anything that could have harmed the Church or its reputation.

“What do you mean by that?”

Dongahar closed his eyes and shook his head. “I warned you, Your Holiness. When the guidelines were still being penned, I told you that he would become a blight.”

“You yourself endorsed their creation!”

“But I had anticipated our sage’s fame peaking then and there. Which is not to say I don’t regard him with a hero’s respect. He revived the Yenice Healer’s Guild, conquered labyrinths, and slew dragons, only to go on to restore order to the beastmen’s country entirely.”

It never felt like I’d actively done any of those things (since everything had just kind of happened to me against my will), so it sounded weird to have it all attributed to me. All I’d done was try to make my way in life. Had I gone wrong somewhere?

“Luciel has indeed accomplished much, but it is absurd to assert that he alone is the Church’s only competent member,” the pope said.

“What matters is not whether that fact is true, but whether the people believe it. The feats of one cast shadows upon those of another.”

I remembered my superior, the top salesman at our company in my past life.

“Explain,” Her Holiness ordered.

“I need not, for among those gathered here are no few who suffer with these very feelings. The frustration of Luciel earning all the honor. Meanwhile, those corrupt healers who should have long been uprooted are left to squabble and fight among themselves for the scraps. The same can be said of the Valkyries’ relationship with their cohorts among the knights.”

“Is that not the responsibility of a leader? *My* responsibility?”

“It is mine, for the knights are commanded by the executives. And it is Granhart’s for the exorcists.”

Dongahar was a racist and a traitor, yet it sounded like he truly believed that what he had been doing was meant to relieve the Church and its knights of impurity.

“When did these plots begin? And answer plainly.”

“It began with the rumors, some three months ago,” Dongahar explained. “Though three months earlier still was when Sage Luciel foiled our demon summoning in the nearby village. That was when our preparations began in earnest.”

The pope froze, her jaw agape. “What would you have done had Luciel truly lost all ability to use his magic?”

“We would have executed him, and assuming we succeeded in that, his corpse would have become the cornerstone of a new Church of Saint Shurule.”

Every question Her Holiness asked was met with truths grimmer and grimmer. It didn’t surprise me to hear his ultimate goal, but it was still a lot to take in. And Dongahar revealed it all calmly, without anger or animosity. He was so at peace it was almost suspicious.

“Tell me, Dongahar. Is it my fault?”

He chuckled. “I’ve always adored that self-loathing of yours. You ought to be more careful. A demon might mistake it for weakness.”

The pope flinched. “What?!”

“Ah, I’ve said too much. No matter. I would have your judgment, *Your*

Holiness. If you by some miracle finally have the gall to pronounce one!”

Dongahar cackled as he looked up at Her Holiness. I sensed surrender. As if he was accepting the sins he had committed and begging for someone to put him to the sword for his crimes against the place he called home. As far as I was concerned, he deserved it. He had defamed me, turned his own knights into demons, and even summoned one himself. And yet, I couldn't see the lie in anything he had just said or in his beliefs of where the Church was headed.

Perhaps he had simply grown tired of seeing his family bicker among themselves, envy one another, and fall victim to spite. Instead, he would claim that my achievements were ill-gotten, and regardless of how true these rumors were, he would at last unite the Church under one common goal until he could ultimately overthrow it.

His downfall had been partly his reliance on demonification, but mostly because he had underestimated the reach of my bonds.

I had a superior in my past life who excelled at his job. He owed it all to a single beefy client that gave him all his sales numbers, and it all came crashing down when they went under. He went from top of the office to bottom of the barrel just like that. And people started to talk.

“I knew he was just coasting on that client this whole time.”

“Give me a fish that big and we'll see who's at the top next quarter.”

They used his failure to excuse their own performances. After suffering through three hard months, however, he was back at the top, and half a year later all the prattlers were gone.

One day, when we were out for drinks, I asked him about the secret to his mental fortitude.

“Congratulations on your comeback,” I said. “Even if it makes my own work look a little less impressive in comparison.”

“Don't worry, I'm comin' after every incentive this quarter too,” he replied.

“I'm close to a promotion myself, so I'll just have to keep trucking. Don't want

my performance dropping while I'm not looking again."

My superior chuckled. "I like you, y'know that? When you talk shit, you do it to my face. Not behind my back like the rest."

"The gossip still bothering you?"

"Hey, I'm only human. They're not wrong that I made out like a bandit with that one client, though. It was a looong three months building up a new client base, restarting business talks, meeting old partners again...and everywhere I went, I'd have those rumors at my back."

"It doesn't seem like much has changed about you from my perspective. Maybe you've got the magic touch."

"I'm just a sore loser, that's all. I wanna know what made me screw up so I don't do it again the next time."

"Well, it gets results. Do you ever think about how all your incredible accomplishments might affect the people around you?"

"You really think about that? Lemme tell you, worrying about others is a good way to make your wallet empty and your head hairless. It's a waste of precious time and energy. Life's too short and fragile to not make the most of the chances it throws at you."

"Good point."

I returned from my recollections and sighed. Our positions weren't so different right about now.

Make the most of the chances life throws at you...

What would I do if I were the judge in this situation? What would Her Holiness do? First and foremost, I would squeeze every drop of information out of him, learn what I could about demonification, and get the name of his boss in Blanche. Otherwise, another storm would find its way to us eventually.

Her Holiness looked into Dongahar's eyes with pity as he waited patiently for her sentence. Bulteuse and his lackeys, however, were not so dignified in the face of death.

“Your Holiness, we are but victims of Sir Dongahar’s temptation!” Bulteuse pleaded. “We merely partook of the strength he promised us. Everything was under Sir Dongahar’s instruction. Please, just spare my life!”

“We were only following orders!” a knight begged. “We couldn’t disobey, Your Holiness!”

“Give us another chance! We will become the mortar for a new Shurule!”

“We will be your shield, your spear, anything you ask. Please, we beg of you!”

“Your Holiness!”

“Your Radiance!”

“Your Merciful Grace!”

The sight of their pitifully hung heads was laughable, like two-bit criminals whose actions had finally caught up to them.

Dongahar bellowed with laughter. “Behold, the best the Church has to offer. Elite for but a glimmer, and dishonorable when cast from their paradise. Let your judgment be just, Your Holiness. Let me witness your resolve in my last moments.”

Everyone present began to murmur. The balance of power had seemingly shifted.

The pope nodded slowly. “Have you any last words? Any remaining grievances you wish to make known to me?”

“None.” I thought he might have spoken about his father, but he merely shook his head. “I wish only to see your resolve that the sun might rise again on our Church.”

Her Holiness was silent for a moment. “Very well. You are headstrong and idealistic, just like your father. Had I not been such a fool...”

“Had you not sent him on that errand while signs of a labyrinth had been recognized?”

“Perhaps...your father would still be with us.”

“You needn’t lie to me. I know why the labyrinth came to be and why my

father perished in it. And I know why you abandoned the effort to cleanse it.” Dongahar closed his eyes and smiled. “I cannot bring myself to hate you even while death waits.”

Her Holiness paused, then grimaced in anguish. She seemed but moments from tears. I didn’t understand. He’d spoken of nothing but pure rage and hate before, and now he was contradicting himself.

“Heed this man’s words well. We stand before a believer—a man of faith. I ask that all present consider what has transpired here,” the pope announced. “Luciel, our newest sage, has accomplished much. And in the interest of honesty, he is not without privilege. Hear me, are there any among us who would claim they have put forth equal effort—perhaps even *greater* effort than he? If so, I would acknowledge you.”

All was quiet. Her Holiness looked out, carefully gazing into every face present, and not a soul moved. Even those who surely had a few words to say to me.

“It would appear there are not,” Her Holiness continued. “On my own papacy, I offer my deepest apologies to each and every one of you.”

“Your Holiness, you mustn’t humble yourself!” Catherine interjected.

“I have done wrong, Catherine. We must seek forgiveness for our mistakes. Is that not right, Luciel? My dear mother and father taught me so as a child.”

“But this isn’t the place to—”

A silhouette appeared behind Catherine, and the next moment she went limp like a puppet. The figure caught her before she could fall, holding her in his arms.

“I think someone needs a timeout before they throw a tantrum. Carry on, Luciel.” Galba disappeared, carrying Catherine away from the field.

I cleared my throat. “Continue, Your Holiness.”

“Thank you,” she said. “There is a reason the labyrinth appeared. It is because of me—because I left the palace. I should have been free to roam the capital in its entirety, but the barrier surrounding the city was damaged during excessive

construction efforts.”

If that had been the case, then the pope was entirely innocent and Lord Reinstar hadn't actually trapped his daughter within the castle. She closed her eyes, reminiscing on the past, before continuing.

“My actions caused the barrier to vanish, and so the labyrinth was formed. I fell into a torpid state of listlessness for several days out of sheer shock when I heard the news. So responsibility fell to the Captain of the Knights at the time. On their first foray into the dungeon, none returned from its depths, and as we all well know, it would remain unconquered until Luciel rescued us from its curse. The fact remains, however, that countless lives were lost under my command, and I can make no excuses for that.”

She bowed, sending a wave of surprise through the knights. Some kneeled, others bowed, while still others were petrified. No one spoke out against her, though.

“I called Dongahar a man of faith,” she continued. “And I stand by that claim. But to excuse his actions would be a betrayal to all of you. This, I have learned.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “The crime of treason is a severe one, and you have only levied yet more sins through the heretical arts of demonification and demonic summoning. Therefore, I... I... I sentence you to exile. Your memory shall be wiped clean and your class terminated.”

Not execution, to my surprise. I had expected him to pay with his life, but forced amnesia was even crueler in a sense.

“Many of my subjects may call for capital punishment, but we of the Church are charged with saving lives, not stealing them,” the pope declared through tears. “The Church of Saint Shurule shall be responsible for no more deaths.”

Everyone went vacant, like their souls had been sucked from their bodies.



All except Dongahar. “As you command, Your Holiness. Had you displayed such fortitude in the past, none could have stood in your way. Not the labyrinth and certainly not the executives. Carry that will from now on. Carry it as you carry the Church to what it was always meant to be.”

“Dongahar...”

To the last, he only thought of the Church.

“I underestimated you, Sage Luciel,” he said. “By way of acknowledgment and apology, I must tell you something before my punishment is delivered.”

“What?” I asked.

“The ones you seek are of Blanche—they are responsible for everything. But you must hurry to Illumasia before they get there first. Should Blanche’s shadow fall over the empire, the Holy City will not escape the flames of war for long. I have no right to ask this of you, but you must protect Shurule. You must protect...Her Holiness...”

Dongahar vomited blood and fell to the ground. Only after a swift cast of Recover, Dispel, and Extra Heal did I barely manage to save his life, but his consciousness never returned.

Her Holiness’s declaration was left on a horribly bitter note.

Afterword

Life's a funny thing. These are the words I found myself ruminating on the day I became an author, and it's already been over five years since then. Here we finally are, at the big double-digit mark with volume ten of *The Great Cleric*. I really couldn't have done it without everyone's support. I wish I was better at expressing just how grateful I am, but I'm sure I haven't been conveying it very well. Well, there's always next year, so I only ask that you keep sticking with me through 2022 (as of this writing, it's currently mid December 2021).

The last two years of Corona have really made me come to respect our medical workers, and it's also made me extremely thankful to those of you who've survived the maelstrom of conflicting information and taken the necessary measures to reduce the spread. I can't wait for the day to come when this virus is as mild as a case of the common cold, but until we develop nanomachines or something (unfortunately, we don't get healing magic), I hope everyone keeps being safe and responsible.

Looking back on the past five years, I notice all the ways my work environment has changed: I had to buy a whole new computer when all this started, I upgraded to a standing desk just last year, and I switched from contacts to glasses. It sounds boring, but blame COVID for that. Ever since lockdown, I can count on one hand the amount of times I've gone out to eat every year, I've started having to get my books electronically, and I even ended up subscribing to a streaming service. Maybe I'm just weird, but even though I feel like I prefer manga electronically, I still need my novels in physical form. Is that just me?

Anyway, time's really flown by the last couple of years. And I honestly don't remember doing anything exciting throughout most of it, so I'm hoping to change that in 2022. Corona made shrine-going a little difficult this year, and it's too early to say how things'll look for upcoming New Year's visits, but know that I'm praying for everyone's health and happiness regardless.

Lastly, I need to thank the ever-wonderful sime for the fantastic illustrations despite my strange and unreasonable quirks, Hihiro Akikaze for the incredible work bringing *The Great Cleric* to life in the manga adaptation, and my editor Mister I for his much-appreciated (though often exasperated) assistance. Thank you for sticking with me.

Thank you to absolutely everyone involved in this publication (especially the proofreaders) and all the readers out there. I'm going to keep doing what I do to try and bring you enjoyable stories. Your support never goes unnoticed.

❖
The Sage
Luciel
❖

❖
The Captain
Catherine
❖

❖
The Recluse
Galba
❖

❖
The Lion
Lionel
❖

❖
The Whirlwind
Brod
❖

❖
The Pope
Fluna Alludelli de Shurule
❖





Bonus Short Story

After parting ways with Luciel, who was bound for Neldahl, Lionel and his companions set out for Yenice. Rendezvousing with Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian along the way, they safely arrived at their destination before making for Luciel's estate, the former Healer's Guild and their would-be base of operations.

Not much time had passed since they had left, and yet returning still felt long overdue. As they savored the nostalgic familiarity, they couldn't help but smile at the happy residents and the bustling streets. Friends and acquaintances waved and greeted them as they passed by. In all honesty, it was a little off-putting compared to the usual reception.

Waiting for them was Nalia, who had heard about their arrival beforehand via arclink.

"Welcome home, Sir Lionel. Friends," she said.

"Welcome home," said her associates.

The words warmed the hearts of all who heard them. Lionel, however, silently felt that his welcome was somewhat undeserved and frowned. The shame of having failed to protect his master from the one entity he was meant to above all else—going so far as to require his *master's* protection—was still vivid in his mind. He was no leader. A protector who couldn't protect was less than worthless.

"Pardon me, ladies, but we've got business in the workshop. Workin' on a little surprise for the boss," Dhoran said.

Together with Pola and Lycian, they slipped by and entered the estate. Dhoran was well aware of the conflict raging in Lionel's heart, but he knew that empty words would bring empty comfort. More than anything, he didn't believe for a second that Lionel would let that indignity bring him down.

Seeing the dwarf's passion for the task at hand, Lionel felt compelled to forge ahead as well. He decided he would press on and become the protector he knew he could be.

“Nalia,” he said, “I’m going to train. I’m going to train and surpass everything I ever was before. Will you be by my side on this journey?”

“I am by your side always, Sir Lionel,” she said.

“Thank you. Might we trouble you for a meal?”

“Certainly.”

And so Lionel began on the path to ever greater heights.

Lionel’s training regimen consisted of much sparring in the underground training hall with Ketty and Kefin, as well as copious amounts of Substance X in order to obtain the skills Luciel had told him about. Nalia, however, considered constant beatings and blackouts less than ideal, so she requested a healer from the Healer’s Guild. Upon hearing that it was for Luciel, Jord immediately accepted, and agreed that an off-duty healer would always be present from then on. Owing to Yenice’s newfound peace, the Order of Healing and its knights joined in the matches, further quickening Lionel’s combat abilities and skill acquisition.

Once he had reached a satisfactory level of competence, Lionel halted his Substance X consumption to begin leveling up in labyrinths. Ketty and Kefin were happy to see his strength gradually returning, but the man himself was impatient. It wasn’t enough to defeat the Wicked One. He’d only be a hindrance to Luciel at this rate.

Nalia frowned at him as he agonized. “Excuse me? Sir Lionel, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“Hm? Yes? It’s not like you to broach a subject so tactfully.”

“Well, I... I think I’m expecting.”

“Expecting a new weapon of Dhoran’s?”

“A child.”

“A child... A child! By the gods, a child!” Lionel cried.

“I know. Now, of all times...”

“Now? Why not now?! I’ve something else to fight for now! Yes, that’s it! I need only be a shield! Thank you, Nalia.”

She giggled. “You’re very welcome.”

Lionel only diversified his training from there, expanding his range of opponents, developing a brand new style unlike anything he had used before. And upward he climbed until the day Luciel at last called for him again.

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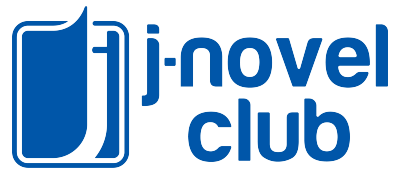
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The Great Cleric: Volume 10

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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